The Pukka Sahib
and other stories

J.P. Das

translated by Bikram K. Das

The Pukka Sahib

Dr. J.P. Das is an eminent Oriya poet, playwright and fiction writer, and also an art-historian and critic. His books of fiction include several collections of short stories and a historical novel. He has been widely translated into English, Hindi and other Indian languages. His earlier collections of short stories in English translation are: *The Magic Deer, The Forbidden Street, The Spider's Web* and *The Prostitute.*

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Jagannath Prasad Das

Translated from the Oriya
by
Bikram K. Das



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Translator's Preface

Jagannath Prasad Das — JP to friends — distinguished himself during a somewhat abbreviated career as a civil servant and is today an award-winning poet, dramatist, novelist, art-historian and critic, who lives in Delhi but writes mainly in Oriya. His true metier, however, is the short story. He is the quintessential raconteur, with an instinctive mastery of the form that this genre imposes. He has several collections of short stories to his credit and although he would be the first to admit that they are not of uniform quality, he invariably manages to hold the reader in thrall from the opening sentence, leading him on through convoluted corridors and depositing him on the threshold of some unforeseen mystery. The surprise ending comes so effortlessly in many of JP's stories that one is hardly aware of it. It is amazing, in fact, that he is able to achieve the enigmatic effect which is so integral to the short story, working as he does within a framework of social realism. His world is the solid, everyday world of contemporary, mainly urban, middle-class India. There is little here that is specifically "Oriya", although JP's Oriya prose is frequently ruggedly colloquial and therefore untranslatable. A feature of many of these stories is the slow, deliberate accretion of detail that seems calculated to make

the reader breathless and impatient, driving him on to the inevitable climax, which provides a sense of relief as well as disbelief.

The dominant impression that the stories leave is one of gentle, often bemused irony. Many of JP's characters are broad caricatures and he enjoys laughing at them. However, the plane of social comedy is only a springboard for exploration at other, more disturbing levels, reminiscent of Chekhov. Ultimately, the presence of the metaphysical is never far away, and it is perhaps here that the specifically Oriya elements of JP's writing are to be found.

The themes and characters of several of the stories have obviously been derived from the writer's experiences in the bizarre and often grotesque world of bureaucracy. The insufferable Jack-in-office who meets with his comeuppance is a recurring figure. JP also draws successfully on the world of literary dilettantism and intrigue which, one suspects, he has had occasion to know at first hand.

JP's stories are certainly very topical. One meets here the rustic youth who has moved to the city, the middle-class professional who has migrated to some economic haven overseas and the strong emancipated woman whose very freedom can be an embarrassment. They are all struggling to cope with the tensions of modern living, with varying degrees of success.

But in another sense JP is very traditional too. Many, perhaps most of his stories are extended parables, with a palpable design on the reader. There is no mistaking the value-system that underlies the frequently agnostic world that the writer projects.

The hallmark of JP's writing is the suavity that he brings to his work, in sharp contrast to the somewhat provincial, even parochial tone of much writing in the other regional languages. Obviously, JP does not feel that he has to shout

in order to make himself heard. The art of understatement, which he cultivates assiduously, is part of the deliberate craftsmanship that he puts into his stories.

The stories presented in translation are personal favourites selected from at least three of JP's collections. Although the writer's finger-prints are unmistakable in all of them, there is quite a variety of themes, moods and persona here. However, it is easy to see the writer's preoccupation with certain recurring motifs.

The first of the stories, *Swati Will Come,* introduces us to JP's emancipated female, who is determined to play the pursuer rather than the quarry. She fixes up an assignation with Bhaskar, leaving him in a state of breathless and palpitating anticipation, traditionally associated with the heroine of medieval romantic poetry. But as the moment of truth approaches, it is Bhaskar who retreats. Why? Is there a straightforward physiological explanation, or are we left confronting an existentialist conundrum?

Empire is one of the several 'mandarin' tales in this collection, in which JP reveals his incisive undertanding of the bureaucratic mind. The pompous Raghunath is made to discover the limits of empire through an encounter which is as much amusing as it is cathartic.

The Interview represents the surrealistic streak in JP's fiction. The charade of a press interview is staged as a camouflage for an amorous tryst, but soon the farce turns into a grim conflict, as the characters are overtaken by forces they have little understanding of.

Folk Culture is an amusing but fairly savage expóse, of the charlatanism which has overtaken national life in various spheres.

The Current is a typical JP story, which leaves the reader with disturbing echoes, after a seemingly innocuous and light-hearted excursion through a landscape peopled largely by caricatures.

I have enjoyed reading and translating all these stories and yet, I cannot help singling out my particular favourite – the ultimate story which gives this collection its title. The tale of the pukka sahib who slides back unknowingly and inevitably to his hidden origins, is based on a true story, involving a real person that most Oriyas of my generation knew and are able to recognise. The original was not liked, probably because he was too successful; but the character in JP's story is entirely forgivable, because he comes to represent the essential human condition. "In my beginning is my end." In the Indian ethos, progress is circular rather than linear. Perhaps this what the short story, which seems to deny the possibility of progression, is all about.

Bikram K Das

Swati Will Come

Swati will come after two months and three days.

Bhaskar read the letter once again. On the day it had come, he calculated that Swati would arrive two months and eighteen days later. He had read the letter several times since, over and over, as though discovering a new meaning with each reading. Although the letter was exceedingly plain and concise, he persisted in trying to find new meanings in it, imagining that each reading brought him a little closer to Swati.

There was no opening salutation. She had written: I am coming to your town on the fifth of November for an interview. I shall arrive in the evening by the Rajdhani Express. Don't come to the station because my aunt will send someone to meet me. I shall send my luggage with him and make up some excuse to come to you for a couple of hours, before I go to my aunt's. I have much to tell you, so keep yourself free. All when we meet.

This was followed by four crosses and another line below: I shall let you know if for some reason I am unable to come.

The letter had been written on a sheet of rough, ruled paper torn from a notebook. But Swati's handwriting was neat

and clear; each stroke spoke of her confident personality. Her self-assured face seemed to peep out of the spaces between the lines. Although he had every word by heart, he repeatedly took the letter out of its envelope, read it, folded it back carefully and replaced it. At first the envelope had sat on his desk, but one day he was suddenly visited by the fear that if, through some act of God, the desk was to catch fire, the letter would be lost. Thereafter he stored the letter in the special drawer in his almirah where he kept his share certificates, chequebooks and other essential documents. Of course it was inconvenient to open the almirah frequently to take the letter out, read it and put it back, but Bhaskar could be certain now that the letter was entirely safe.

It was his treasure. On receiving the letter he had torn the envelope open and dropped it on the floor among the discarded pieces of paper. But having read the letter three times he felt compelled to pick up the envelope and read the address on it. This too was in Swati's handwriting. Wiping imaginary dust away he put the letter back in the envelope. There was only his address on it, nothing more and an indistinct seal across the postage stamp, which he could not decipher. There had been no mistake in the address and the letter had reached him in time. He thanked the postal department mentally for delivering the letter to him safely. How many important letters went astray! The mere thought that this one might have been lost, was painful.

The letter was as unexpected as his meeting with Swati on the train. He had been strolling on the platform to relieve the tedium of a long journey and the face of a girl at a window had looked familiar. A girl with a similar face had been at college with him. As far as he could remember, she had been shy, sitting silently through classes, talking to no one. Swasti or some such name she had. It had been twenty-five years ago. True, he had remained a bachelor but his friends had

sons who were in college. The girls in his class were probably grandmothers by now.

On reaching the end of the platform he turned and walked back to the compartment. This time, he was unable to look at the girl's face directly. Scrutinising her out of the corners of his eyes he decided that if this wasn't the girl from his college days it was her younger sister. At the next station he got off again and shuffled to and fro in front of her compartment as though trying to resolve a doubt. It was Swati who provided the solution at the following station. He was pretending to flip through a magazine at a bookstall opposite the compartment when she waved to call him. As he took the few steps towards her he tried to smoothen the creases in his kurta and sweep his straggling hair back, though he knew he would look even more flustered as he did so. The girl had apparently read his mind; when he drew near she laughed and said: "Yes, I am who you think I am."

Bhaskar had always believed himself to be sharp and masterful, but had to admit defeat now. He had doubts over her name and was unable to decide on the degree of familiarity in his pronouns. However, trying to conceal his uneasiness he said, in a tone that indicated both question and answer: "Law College?" "Absolutely correct!" she replied. "Full marks! However, I shall ask no further questions to risk your failing the test. I can see you've forgotten my name. It's Swati." The consequent words eluded Bhaskar but fortunately for him the train started to move and with a hurried "See you at the next station!" he rushed back to his own compartment.

Swati will come after a month and seventeen days.

No, there was no error in his calculation, as the calendar which hung in front of him, had a ring pencilled around the fifth of November. Each morning brought a reduction in the

period of waiting but how lazily the days seemed to pass! He moved his finger across the page of the calendar. If only he knew the mantra that could make the days fly!

He got up, walked to the almirah and took out the letter. He had last read it at ten the night before. The bell rang as he was walking to his desk. He opened the front door to see who it was. Two students from the school for the blind stood outside holding a receipt book for donations. He normally banged the door on such visitors but the letter had filled his mind with such cheerful prospects that he gave the students a ten-rupee note and closed the door gently after them.

Seated at his desk, letter in hand, preparing to read it, he looked around the room. His books and other belongings were in place but surely things could be arranged more aesthetically. When he had received Swati's letter, his eyes travelled to the disorder on the desk. He had immediately tugged at the edge of the tablecloth to remove the wrinkles and busied himself in rearranging the books and papers. Then he remembered the state of the other rooms. There was enough time in hand to fix everything. The house hadn't been painted in years; the landlord never lacked excuses. Well, he would get things done himself, never mind the expense. He would think later about the deduction from the rent.

The repairs to the house were begun immediately. He decided to replace the broken bathroom door. However, the painter and the carpenter frequently stopped work. He shouted at them and spent the days in great mental tension. At last it was all done, except the bathroom door. He was terrified by the thought that Swati would arrive to find the bathroom, doorless. Then one day, the carpenter arrived amidst all his misgivings and completed the work in half an hour. Bhaskar dedicated himself to other worries.

Such as his bedroom and bed. The walls looked fresh and bright and Bhaskar had broadly decided on the colour of the

sheet to be spread on the bed. He picked up and tested the two pillows. Some people preferred a firm, high pillow. The doctor who treated him for spondylitis had recommended a very thin pillow. What kind of pillow did Swati like? He had mentally placed Swati on the bed, though he was not entitled to such daydreams. How well did he know her? But then he reminded himself of the line in her letter: all when we meet. The words were rich with possibility.

But the thought brought anxiety together with excitement. Once, he had been sure of himself, but no longer. He felt depressed. Then he forced the doubts away and reminded himself of Swati.

He had made plans to meet her at the next station, talk to her and take charge of the situation. So far, it was Swati who had managed their encounter and the emerging relationship. But now, when he faced her, he would no longer be passive. He would walk up to her confidently and say: "The reason for my not recognising you (using the more intimate pronoun) is that while the rest of us have been growing old you have remained unchanged: young and beautiful!" He would wash his face clean and groom his hair before he got off the train, to see her at the next station.

But Swati did not give him the opportunity. It was she who walked down the corridor into his compartment and said "I thought I'd spare you the trouble." He found himself at a loss again, despite all his mental preparation. She sat down beside him and said, "This handbag is all the luggage I have. So I thought, why wait until the next station?"

Bhaskar glanced at his watch and realised it was time to go to the office. He got up hurriedly, replaced the letter and prepared to leave.

Swati will come after four weeks.

Now Bhaskar kept a tiny pocket calendar in the envelope. Each passing date was cancelled out with an "x". Today, when he opened the envelope to read the letter, he put a mark on the fifth and counted the intervening days.

The crosses he had made reminded him of the four crosses in her letter. Perhaps her name was Swatilekha and the crosses stood for the four letters in her name. It was a beautiful and dignified name, complete in itself but heavy on the lips. Surely everyone either called her Swati or Lekha. Or did she have a convenient nickname, such as Rimjhim or Jhilmil? When they met he would ask her what that short, light name was and try to use it.

Those crosses. Just as he had learnt to discover Swati in her handwriting, perhaps he could find her total being, revealed in the four crosses. Yes, he would be able to recognise those crosses made in her handwriting, in a whole crowd of crosses of various kinds. Crosses, he remembered, symbolised lovers' kisses in western culture. Would he find this in the dictionary? Yes, it was confirmed. "X" symbolised the unknown as well as the kiss. Four crosses. Four kisses. What was she trying to say? *All* when we meet?

His mind tingled to an unknown thrill and he got up, filled a glass with water and swallowed a medicinal tablet. He had to be fit in body and mind when Swati came. He had to welcome her with everything he had during those two hours. What could he give her? Perhaps it would be her tea-time. He would send the servant away and make her a cup of tea with his own hands. He had already tried out his tea-making skills several times. Not too bad, the tea he prepared. Everything he would need to offer her tea, was at hand.

He had been anxious about the delay in the painting of the house, but everything had been ready for days. Everything

neatly arranged in the various rooms. But he was worried that some little detail might have been overlooked. For instance, the doorbell had not functioned the other day. He got up and tested it several times; it was working. What if it didn't work on *that* day? Or if the power was suddenly cut off? No, he would keep the door open and wait. Or wait outside for her arrival. Of course, he would make sure the key was in his pocket, just in case the door slammed itself shut!

Bhaskar's mind was crowded with numerous minor anxieties. Such as: what would he offer her to eat? Snacks could easily be served with tea, but just in case he was able to persuade her to stay longer ... Drinks after dark? Did Swati drink? She was so careful of her health; she had refused that last cup of tea on the train.

Seating herself beside him that day she had said, "You must be wondering why I seem to be following you." "No, no," he said, "I should have come over to see you. But it never occurred to me that I needn't wait until the next station." "The question is," she said , "whose need is greater? If you had thought it important to see me, you would have done what I did." "Does that mean," Bhaskar asked, "that you consider this meeting highly important?" "Most certainly," Swati replied. "Can there be any doubt? But just in case you are wondering why it is so important, let me tell you something to remove all your doubts. When we were in college I had a certain weakness for you."

A shiver of ecstasy ran up the marrow of his bones. He looked into her eyes. He had had nothing to do with this girl when they were in college together. They had probably never even spoken to each other. Swati was smiling faintly as she looked at him. Was this only the teasing of a lighthearted girl? Or had he really been special to her?

Swati will come after eighteen days.

The nearer the day approached, the more apprehensive he grew that something would go wrong at the last minute and she wouldn't come. Her interview would be postponed. She would turn up with an escort. If nothing else happened, the train would be so late that she would be unable to find an excuse to spend those two hours with him. Any day now, another letter would inform him that, for some reason or the other, she had changed her plans. The postman would bring her telegram. Each time he picked up the phone he dreaded Swati's voice, at the other end, breaking the terrible news.

That day he carried the letter in his pocket to the office. He would be able to snatch a few moments from work to read it. He was finding it difficult to concentrate on his work. Files had been piling up.

The words of an imaginary dialogue rang constantly in his head, like a serialised drama. What Swati would say to him, what he would say in reply, the turn that the conversation would take, etc. He couldn't imagine how their relationship was to be compressed into a span of two hours when it had been interrupted for so long. He neither corresponded with her nor had he spoken to her on the phone. Sometimes, he had dialled her number, had heard her phone ring, but disconnected as soon as a voice responded. She had told him in no uncertain terms that he must never write, never ring. She had also informed him that she never picked up the phone when it rang. Nevertheless, he persisted in dialling her number and was satisfied to hear her phone ring.

Their relationship was confined to that train journey. Nothing more. But she had told him everything about herself during those few hours. Her M.A. degree, her year-long stint in the Law College, during which she had got married and had a baby. Then her appointment as a lecturer. Her marriage

turning sour, etc. Bhaskar had listened, answering the questions she asked about him, briefly. They had exchanged addresses and telephone numbers, but she had warned him against writing or calling. The address was being given just for his information but "Remember, no letters or phone calls." He had accepted her prohibitory orders without question. Perhaps the husband would create problems.

Swati will come after seven days.

Now he had the inescapable feeling that, in the end, she wouldn't come. After all, what claims did he have on her that she would come to him by stealth, to spend those two hours with him? When he thought about her not coming his mind grew inexplicably light. He would read her letter again. All that he knew about her, understood of her, told him she would surely let him know if she was unable to come.

He called up the railway station and found out the Rajdhani's scheduled time of arrival. On that particular day it was running two hours late. He was aware that it was pointless trying to find out the train's expected time of arrival so many days in advance; nevertheless, he found the pleasure of anticipation heightened by the knowledge.

He made a quick survey of the house and found everything in order. But he would make a last-minute check before she arrived. He had gone over the details so many times that everything had permeated his consciousness. Like the text of her letter.

When she had told him everything about herself, seated beside him, Bhaskar had felt transported into an unreal world. Swept away, out of that crowded stifling compartment, alone, all alone, astride some disembodied symphony, into an unknown universe. When he was taking leave of her on the platform he said, "Ours was a chance meeting. We had no

contact earlier. Why did you tell me so much?" And Swati replied gravely, "Human beings at sometime feel the need to reveal everything about themselves to some person or the other? It's best to tell it to a stranger, because then there's no risk of a problem arising. You are both a stranger and a friend. That's why I told you everything."

How logical. He was the perfect audience for her innermost secrets but their acquaintance and contact remained limited to that journey.

Swati will come after three days.

He had been unable to sleep for some days past and lay tossing about shrouded in worries. The night before he had swallowed a sleeping tablet and had disturbed sleep. All night he thought of Swati. What should he say? What should he do? The thoughts, joyful at first, had turned into apprehension. To liberate himself from these fears he kept assuring himself that, at the last moment, she wouldn't come.

When they had parted he never imagined that Swati would contact him again. Then she rang, most unexpectedly. Her voice had been as intimate as before. She asked him how he was, told him about herself, her children and her home, and assured him that she would phone again from time to time. "*I'll* call you," she said as she hung up.

And call she did, three or four times. Bhaskar thought she called because she was in need of a sympathetic friend. She hadn't become the object of his fantasies then. It was her letter that changed everything.

Swati will come after twenty-six hours.

He woke up at four in the morning. He had deliberately taken no medication that night. Lack of sleep brought a host of

worries. He felt weak and helpless. As though he was plunging into an unknown sea, with not the slightest experience of swimming. Past midnight, everything — Swati's letter, her coming — seemed unreal. As day broke, he had an unpleasant dream. He couldn't remember what it was, but the aftertaste was depressing.

He had given up reading that letter for some days now. His only concern was: how was he going to face her when she arrived? Then he told himself, not Swati but her letter would come, informing him that her visit was off. He seemed to be living in hope of such a letter.

He had planned to go on leave a day before her coming. But he lacked the courage now to sit all alone at home, awaiting the truth of Swati's coming.

Swati will come after twelve hours.

The alarm rang. Unnecessarily, because he had been awake for hours. The day for which he had been preparing had arrived at last.

He got up and removed the bedsheet. It would have to be changed. There were many small things he would have to attend to, in case there was no letter or telegram from her saying she wasn't coming. Or no telephone call. He looked anxiously at the phone, with faint hope in his eyes. As though the instrument would come to life at his look and start ringing. And there would be Swati at the other end telling him she wasn't coming.

He felt tired and lazy. Still, he washed and readied himself for the day. He swallowed a tablet hoping to steady his nerves and went round the house surveying the preparations he had been making for weeks.

Swati will come after two hours.

He rang up the station and was informed that the train was expected on time. The servant had been given leave. Everything in the house was in order. Clean sheets on the bed. The tea things in the kitchen. Everything in place. Only Bhaskar was unprepared.

For the last time he sat down at his desk with her letter in his hand. It was straightforward and direct. Swati would come straight to his house from the station. For two hours. "All when we meet."

Taking pen and paper he wrote out a little note: I'm sorry I had to go away on urgent work. Please excuse me. Phone me if it's convenient.

He pinned the note to the door, locked it and walked out with hurried steps.

Empire

Raghupati was reputed to be an honest, dedicated and able officer. But the qualities most people knew him by were his strictness, his bad temper and harsh language. He reinforced this choleric image by wearing thick-framed spectacles, smoking a cigar and keeping a dog. The animal was as bad-tempered as his master and greeted visitors by growling and baring his teeth. Wherever Raghupati went, he took his dog along and people said the brute was a living symbol of his master's character. Although Raghupati never kept a gun or any other weapon, he had two pairs of glasses, one for reading and the other for distant vision; while he wore one he held the other in his hand and it had the stopping-power of a loaded revolver. People scurried out of the way hastily on seeing him. Although everyone praised him for his work, no one ventured close unless it was absolutely necessary.

After he took over as District Magistrate, the tone of the administration changed. His predecessor had been courteous and soft-spoken, popular and god-fearing, but wholly incompetent. After Raghupati's arrival the doors of the office started to open on time. Files which had lain dead for years came to life and one no longer found dust or cobwebs in the

office. When people spoke about the previous DM they referred to him as a "good man", and this description implied his incompetence as an official; likewise, when Raghupati was described as a "good officer", it was understood that as a person he was the reverse. This would suggest, though it would be hard to sustain as an argument, that one cannot be a good man and a good officer at the same time!

Be that as it may, no one could dispute Raghupati's awesome efficiency in the office. His seriousness and discipline were not confined to his work but had influenced his personal and family life as well, as a result of which his home was a miniature of the district administration; his wife, children and servants had their respective places in the hierarchy. For instance, Raghupati dealt with his wife as he would with any Class II subordinate, while his children never rose higher in his estimation than Class IV employees. In short, Raghupati was an absolute monarch and his home, together with the rest of the district, was his empire.

The one discordant element in this ideal setup was his youngest daughter. She was ill most of the time, afflicted by a variety of ailments, and her physical growth did not match her age. Her health did not improve despite intensive treatment, and this was a source of anguish for Raghupati. Years of treatment by eminent specialists at famous hospitals and clinics proved ineffective. Now, after trying out all kinds of indigenous as well as imported systems of medicine, Raghupati had stopped consulting physicians. Those that he turned to, when the doctors had disappointed him, were god-men, practitioners of occult arts, astrologers and the like.

Before long Raghupati's subordinates had discovered this one chink in the boss's armour. They tried to court his favour by bringing over varieties of sadhus and holy men to his home, which became a haunt for people with matted hair and beards, in ochre robes.

However, Raghupati never allowed this unfortunate circumstance to affect his work. He reached the office precisely at ten every morning and worked all day with the utmost concentration and efficiency. He regularly went out on tour, throughout the district and these visits created terror among subordinates in outlying places. He was now on one such tour, inspecting a subordinate office and the incompetent official in charge of the establishment stood facing him, bathed in sweat, calling upon his favourite gods for protection. When Raghupati questioned him about the office he could only stammer; he coughed, gulped, scratched the back of his neck, but the answers did not come. Raghupati's temper was rising visibly and the poor subordinate was certain that before long he would go up in flames. He waited for a chance, and as soon as it came he pulled out the unfailing weapon which he had been hoarding, for just such an occasion.

For a brief moment, the barrage of words from Raghupati had been halted and gathering up his courage, the man said, "Sir, Pashupati, has been waiting to see you."

"Who is Pashupati?" Raghupati thundered, his voice dark with irritation.

The subordinate, who had been unable to speak, suddenly became loquacious and started to describe Pashupati with a hundred tongues. Pashupati was a mere peon in that office, but he was famous throughout the region for his spiritual powers. He had in his possession a number of ancient palm-leaf manuscripts on astrology and other occult sciences, and on any holiday his home was crowded with help-seekers who came to him with all kinds of questions. He would consult his books, make planetary calculations and find solutions to all their problems.

Having said this, the subordinate glanced at Raghupati to gauge the effectiveness of his weapon. But it did not seem to

be working; Raghupati knew too much about god-men to be easily impressed.

The subordinate changed his strategy.

"Sir, Pashupati was suspended some years ago," he said.

"Why?" Raghupati asked with mild curiosity.

It was working! The subordinate informed Raghupati that Pashupati had suddenly left the office, without applying for leave or informing anyone, and wandered off into the Himalayas to practise austerities. Not even the people at home knew where he was. Then, later, someone from his village who had gone on pilgrimage to Kedarnath and Badrinath saw him on a remote mountain pass, mounted on a gigantic he-goat. Five years later he returned to the village of his own accord. His services had been terminated, but hundreds of people recommended that he be reinstated. Including a minister.

Raghupati was about to ask under which provision of the service rules an employee who had been away without leave for five years could be reinstated. The man read the question in Raghupati's face and continued, "The minister's nephew had been suffering from asthma for years, but Pashupati healed him within a week."

A doubt rose in Raghupati's mind. Was this lazy, incompetent fellow trying to cash in on his weakness? If so, he would resume his inspection of the office. But the point about the minister's nephew made him waver. Before he could decide, the subordinate had clinched the issue by summoning Pashupati and got him to stand in front of the boss, hands joined together reverentially.

Raghupati was disappointed. Dressed in khaki livery, and without a beard, the man looked every inch an office peon. However, he decided to terminate the inspection, gathered up the papers on the desk and turned his attention to Pashupati. Tea and biscuits arrived, making the transition easier; the

atmosphere grew relaxed and the subordinate officer started to talk with easy assurance.

"What do you say, Pashupati? The sahib's daughter will recover, won't she?" he asked the peon, glancing sideways at Raghupati.

Pashupati closed his eyes and chanted the names of God. "It's all His will!" he said.

The words were ambiguous and not particularly reassuring to Raghupati. The subordinate asked again, "When should the sahib come to you then?"

"Whenever huzoor wishes," Pashupati replied, referring to Raghupati.

"How about tomorrow? It's a Sunday. Your puja will be on tomorrow, won't it?"

"How can we not have puja on a Sunday?" Pashupati replied. "And tomorrow is the night of the full moon as well. Huzoor can come tomorrow."

Asking the peon to go, the subordinate studied the expression on Raghupati's face. He had not been completely won over yet. Giving him no time to think, the subordinate said, "It's Sunday tomorrow, Sir. Pashupati's house isn't too far away. I think, Sir, there's no harm in giving him a try."

Raghupati was unable to refuse. He only said, "But I don't have the horoscope with me."

Pashupati was summoned again and the subordinate asked him, "Sir will visit your village tomorrow. Is it necessary to bring his horoscope?"

"It will be enough if you can tell me the date of his birth and the zodiac sign."

"Very well, you can go," the subordinate said. Turning to Raghupati, he asked, "Sir, do you remember your date of birth?" When Raghupati confirmed this he got busy making arrangements for the visit to Pashupati's village next day. It was decided that they would leave early in the morning so

that they could get there before the sun got too hot, and return the same evening.

Pashupati the peon was as much a shirker as his boss in the office. The subordinate official had no faith in his alleged powers and had never visited his village nor consulted him. So that night he gathered all the necessary information about Pashupati's village, told the driver how to get there and arrived early next morning, at the bungalow where Raghupati was camping. It was the beginning of winter and the mornings were slightly chilly. Raghupati put on a suit, got his dog ready and emerged from his bedroom precisely at seven a.m. When the driver suggested that they start immediately as the crowds would begin to gather at Pashupati's home, the subordinate said, "Nothing to worry about. I'll see to it that Sir is attended to first."

The peon's village was quite some distance away and the road was in bad shape. It took a while to get there. The sun grew hot and the dog, seated beside Raghupati, began barking for no reason at all. Before Raghupati could quieten him the subordinate said, "There are some shrub jungles ahead and Pashupati's village is just beyond them." But they passed the shrub jungles and picked up the road again and then some more jungles came; the subordinate tried to divert Raghupati's attention and keep him entertained by talking about all kinds of irrelevant matters.

When they reached their destination the morning was well advanced. Raghupati's face had turned slightly red with heat as well as anger and the dog had resumed barking loudly. A fairly large crowd had assembled. Raghupati got out of the car, irritated by the heat, the faint rumblings of hunger, the garrulous subordinate and the barking dog. Some other subordinate official from the office, who had been awaiting their arrival, greeted them. They were told that they would have to walk to the peon's house at the other end of the village, through

narrow lanes and throngs of naked children. Raghupati was thoroughly uncomfortable inside the black woollen suit, now sodden with perspiration, though he was an object of wonder for the villagers. They passed through a gate erected in the middle of the village and Raghupati felt certain it had been put up in his honour; but he was disappointed when he saw the streamers of coloured paper leading from the gate to the peon's house. Someone informed him that the decorations had been put up to celebrate the puja on the night of the full moon.

"Who has brought that dog here?" someone asked in a loud and indignant voice. Raghupati's footsteps came to a halt; he turned round and saw a couple of men obstructing the progress of his dog, which was about to pass through the gate. His subordinate said in a low voice, "English dog — belongs to the sahib; let it pass." But the people on guard said, "No, the master's sanctuary begins here. No dog or cat, no fish or meat, is allowed." Raghupati glared for a moment at the man who had the temerity to equate his dog with meat, fish or cats, but the next moment he recovered his poise and walked on, after entrusting the dog to yet another subordinate's care.

Another two steps, another gate and the path veered to the right. The place was piled high with the shoes and slippers of reverential devotees. "Sir, you can keep your shoes on," said the guiding subordinate, but remembering the episode of the dog, Raghupati took his shoes and socks off, although it was extremely unpleasant to walk in his bare, sweaty feet on that dusty path. Likewise, he had to curb his desire to light up a cigar and take a puff; the absence of his dog and shoes had robbed him of his boldness.

They had to stoop low in order to enter the thatched hut which housed the master's shrine. A tiny canopy on one side of a little courtyard, underneath which, on an elevated platform, sat the peon Pashupati in the lotus posture, amid a pile of palm-leaf manuscripts. Oil-lamps twinkled and joss sticks

smouldered all around him. Freshly bathed, dressed in a dhoti of raw silk, his forehead smeared with sandalwood paste, Pashupati was engrossed in reading one of the ancient manuscripts, thick glasses over his eyes, muttering something to himself. Below him sat the many devotees who had come to him with their problems, looking raptly at him. Most were illiterate villagers who had come to Pashupati hoping to be cured of a variety of afflictions; among them was a single well-dressed visitor who seemed to have come from some far-off place and sat with bowed head. Raghupati's subordinate said, "Sir, please wait; I'll get a chair for you." Then he disappeared, and Raghupati realised he would not return. It was unlikely that a chair could be found in that village; and even if it was found it would certainly be a sacrilege to occupy a seat higher than the master's. Raghupati walked through that crowd of filthy villagers and squatted, cross-legged, on the ground next to the well-dressed person. It was difficult to find sitting room in that crowd and his English clothes were not suited to such a posture. The sun, directly overhead, shone full on him.

Raghupati sat looking intently at Pashupati, but the peon was busy reading the manuscripts and explaining things to the person sitting next to him, in a language which was unintelligible. The poor villager had come for relief from some incurable disease, but Pashupati told him, "According to the book, your troubles arise from a chakra. Is there a chakra in your house?" Raghupati thought to himself: what answer would he have given if the master had asked him this question? But the villager gave a simple reply: "No." On hearing this answer Pashupati took some freshly plucked leaves and rubbed the manuscript vigorously with them; then, adjusting his glasses he asked, "No chakra? Is there a chitra then?" When the man said "No" once more, Pashupati said to another man sitting beside him, "Call my brother, will you? Maybe he can read what's in the book."

Pashupati's elder brother, who assisted him in interpreting the books, came and rubbed some more leaves into the book, adjusted Pashupati's glasses over his own eyes, tying the ends around his ears with twine and tried to decipher the mysterious word that had baffled Pashupati.

After a long time Pashupati turned his head towards Raghupati, who felt sure that the peon would attend to him immediately and solve his problem. But as soon as their eyes met, Pashupati looked away; taking the book away from his brother he trained his own eyes on it, trying to decipher it. Raghupati felt the urge to get up and walk out; he would find the fawning subordinate and give him a piece of his mind, as well as demolish his character-roll; and as for the peon's illegal reinstatement in service, he would ensure that it was cancelled. But the crowd of devotees waiting breathlessly in the hot sun, the sanctified master in his raw silk dhoti, crowned with red sindoor and sandalwood paste, the piles of ancient palm-leaf manuscripts, drove such thoughts out of his mind; and as he looked, with a slight feeling of awe, at the peon seated on his throne, he could see the face of his own daughter and the imagined face of the minister's nephew who had been healed by Pashupati.

Just then Raghupati saw his obsequious subordinate, standing comfortably in the shade on the verandah. He glared at the man before he could avert his gaze and make good his escape. Standing where he was, the subordinate signalled to him that he would not be able to wade through that crowd and reach Raghupati. Then, using his hands and fingers, eyes and lips in a variety of gestures, he conveyed the following message to Raghupati: Sir, I've sent someone to fetch a chair for you. Sir, please be patient; you will soon have a comfortable seat. I'll go to the master at once and ask him to attend to you as soon as he is through with this poor fellow. Your daughter will be cured, Sir.

Having signalled all this to Raghupati, the man quickly disappeared. Silently, Raghupati cursed him and all his ancestors. Because now Raghupati knew full well that in that place, even his own authority would be futile, let alone the power of the insignificant subordinate. In the empire existing within that low-thatched hut, the peon Pashupati was the only sovereign; those sitting below were his humble petitioners. Once Raghupati realised this truth he sat quietly, awaiting his turn.

The Interview

That's how misfortune always comes; without prior warning, Chandrahas told himself. No sooner had his car entered the hotel he saw his old friend Sovan, getting in as well. As he was parking his car Chandrahas turned to his companion and said, "There's a small problem!" Showing not the slightest inclination to find out what the problem was, Sharvari said, "In that case, you can drop me off at home and come back." Without replying to her Chandrahas said, "Who could have guessed that someone you hardly ever meet would turn up now! What rotten luck!"

Chandrahas had taken great pains over the arrangements for the meeting with Sharvari. He was a film producer and Sharvari a lecturer. They had met on an Indian Airlines flight. He was on a business trip while she was going for a seminar. They became friends during the two-hour flight and Chandrahas was of great help to Sharvari in an unfamiliar city. On their return flight, Chandrahas had shuffled his engagements around to make sure he was on the same flight. Thereafter he had kept up the contact and gradually they grew somewhat intimate. Although Sharvari had lost her earlier hesitation he had not yet been able to possess her completely. After a great deal of pleading he had got her to agree to spend

a day with him in a hotel. He made the booking and spent four whole days counting the intervening moments. The waiting was unbearable. But the number of days turned into hours and then into minutes and finally the moment arrived when they drove through the gates of the hotel. It was then that the evil planet turned up, threatening all his plans.

Sharvari said again, "Come on, take me home." "Don't worry," Chandrahas said, "I'll settle everything in a minute." He shut his eyes as he spoke and when he opened them again he had thought of a solution. He opened his briefcase and took out a small notepad; then, placing it in Sharvari's hand he said, "You are a journalist and have come here to interview me. I've given you an appointment to meet me in the lounge at noon. I'll wait in the car now while you walk ahead into the hotel. I'll enter after two minutes. If my friend is still around we'll have to fake an interview. We can go to our room once he's gone."

He had been certain she would turn down his suggestion but she put the notepad in her handbag and fumbled around to see if she had a pen. Then, getting out of the car she said, "Very well, follow me after a couple of minutes." After she had walked a couple of steps, she turned around and asked Chandrahas, "What's my name?" Responding immediately he said, "Uma — Uma Yadav. From the *Star.*"

Two minutes later he emerged, locked the car and walked into the hotel. Sovan who saw him before he could see Sovan, rose from his chair and approached him. "We live in the same city," he complained, "yet we're meeting after a whole year! And that too in this strange place!" Chandrahas thought he would find out how long Sovan was going to be there; if he had no plans to stay long he would join Sharvari after Sovan had left. After a few preliminary questions he asked Sovan, "What brings you here?" "You know brother, I have to meet all kinds of people in my profession," Sovan replied. "I am

supposed to meet someone here at twelve-thirty this afternoon. I came early but God knows when the fellow will arrive. And you?" "Oh, some journalist has been pestering me for an interview," Chandrahas said. "I thought I would ask the person to meet me here instead of at home." And before he could say anything more Sovan said, "Could it be the girl who's sitting there? Let's go and find out!" He dragged Chandrahas by the arm to the lounge where Sharvari was sitting and accosted her, "Excuse me, are you waiting for someone?" Sharvari asked him without looking at Chandrahas, "Is your name Chandrahas?" Before Sovan could reply, Chandrahas said, "No, *I'm* Chandrahas." She smiled in acknowledgement and said, "My name is Uma Yadav. I'm from the *Star*." "I hope you didn't have to wait too long," Chandrahas said. "This is my friend Sovan." She said nothing in reply but took her notepad and pen out of her bag and asked, "Would you object if I used a tape-recorder during the interview?"

Sovan was obliged to leave them now but he took a seat at a little distance. Although rather surprised at Sharvari's question, Chandrahas was happy to see that she was participating fully in the drama. He said, "I'm afraid I won't be able to speak freely with the tape-recorder on. If I said something silly it would go on record permanently!" "Yes, I know, many people have such fears," Sharvari said. "Very well then, no tape-recorder!"

Chandrahas looked at Sharvari and signalled that as Sovan was sitting far away enough not to eavesdrop, they could talk normally. But she said, paying no attention to his gestures, "Before I ask my first question, could I request you to tell me something about yourself?"

Chandrahas shut his eyes and seemed lost in thought for a few moments; then he opened his eyes again and said, "I think my past life has nothing to do with my work as a maker of films. So I would prefer to talk about my first film."

"No artist can isolate himself wholly from his work," Sharvari replied. "What relation your past life has to your films will be clear once you start talking about it. It's important for me, therefore, to know something about your life."

Chandrahas lowered his voice and said, pleading, "Sharvari...", but she ignored him.

"Besides," she went on, "you may have noticed that my paper, the *Star*, focusses more on the personal lives of artists, than their art."

"Very well, then," Chandrahas began, "I was born into a lower middle-class family. My father was a schoolteacher. My life was spent in want, if not in utter poverty. In those days I imagined that freedom was the ultimate goal in life. But once I gained my freedom, it had to be something else."

Sharvari scribbled something in her notepad. Then she asked, "I'd like to know, what happened during the intervening period between the want and the freedom?"

"When I was in college, I had few friends and was largely confined to myself. In fact, even earlier..."

"Wait a minute," Sharvari said, scribbling away, "I'll ask you later about your childhood. Since you've started, tell me more about your college days. Surely you had *some* intimate friends then?"

Chandrahas tried to remember who his intimate friends had been. For ages he hadn't found the time to think back. Or perhaps he hadn't tried. Now he closed his eyes and tried to step back into his youth. When he recalled life in college it was that red-brick structure and the tiny room in the hostel that floated up. And then he remembered the two classmates who had shared his cell in the hostel as well as the wooden bench in the lecture-room for four years. He opened his eyes and recited their names to Sharvari.

"Do you ever meet them now?" she asked.

"No. Maybe once or twice since we left college."

"Have you tried to meet them? Or get news of them?"

"No. There hasn't been time."

"Was it because you found new friends who were more important?"

"No, not that," Chandrahas replied, and tried to think when and where and in what circumstances his old friends had been left behind. What had happened to his roommate? Chandrahas had heard he'd found a petty job in a company somewhere. He had made no attempt to keep track. Had his friends tried to keep in touch? "Friendship is a two-way relationship," he said. "Both parties are to blame for a lost friendship."

"It's about *you* that I want to know," Sharvari said. "How could you cut away those old relationships?"

"No one cuts relationships away," he replied. "They get cut on their own."

Sharvari smiled faintly as she scribbled into her notepad. She repeated, as though reciting: "'No one cuts away relationships; they get cut on their own.' I'll use that as a quotation, if you don't mind."

Chandrahas was caught in a dilemma. He had forgotten that this episode, initiated by him, was a mere fragment of drama. It seemed to pierce him now like a beam of light, probing into his being, exposing him naked to the world. Just then, fortunately for him, Sovan rose from his chair and walked up to their table, saying, "I did not want to interrupt your interview but I see you haven't yet offered the lady something to drink."

Sighing with relief Chandrahas said, "I'll have a beer." "Yes, I know that," Sovan said. "I've ordered a beer for you. But what I want to know is: what will Miss Yadav have?"

Chandrahas had failed repeatedly, despite many efforts, to persuade Sharvari to accept a drink. "I don't like these things," she would say. But today she said in reply to Sovan's

question, looking directly at Chandrahas, "I'll have a Bloody Mary." Has there been a mistake somewhere, Chandrahas thought; but Sharvari's behaviour appeared perfectly natural; the notepad in her hands was rock steady. He looked into her eyes but found no answer to his query.

When the drinks had arrived Sovan said, "I'll leave now. I wonder when my friend is coming."

Although Chandrahas had not welcomed Sovan's presence at first he now wanted Sovan to remain with them and relieve him of an unusual situation. But Sovan got up and walked back to his table saying, "Sorry, Miss Yadav, I won't disturb you again. You can resume the interview."

Chandrahas had hoped that things would return to normal once Sovan left. But Sharvari picked up her glass unhesitatingly, took a couple of sips, picked up her pen and said, "All right, you can tell me about your childhood now."

He looked into her unforgiving eyes and said, "To tell you the truth, I was never close to my parents or others in the family. I was always lonely."

"Don't you think one has to make an effort to set up any relationship — even make sacrifices?"

"Relationships have always felt like a burden to me," he replied.

"Now you can talk about your professional life," she said, writing.

Chandrahas could not think of any specific period, when he tried to recall his professional life. Where did it begin; where did it lead; where would it end? Who were his companions on the journey? Whose name was he to remember at this moment? Or perhaps his life was a flowing stream, with Sharvari sitting on one bank, watching him float away on the current meaninglessly, helplessly.

Seeing Chandrahas silent Sharvari said, "I'd like you to tell me about the people you've met during your professional life."

He realised they had lost control of the drama they had begun. He was trapped in the world that Sharvari was creating as she sat there, innocently playing out a role. There was no exit for him. In an effort to cut through the illusion he took his eyes off her and looked around. With the day advancing the hotel had turned into a forest of people. Life went on merrily outside the air conditioned hall. The people at the surrounding tables chattered away; a sweet hum enlivened the room. All in all, it was just an ordinary afternoon, shorn of any mystery.

As that awareness settled on him he gathered courage and said, "Miss Yadav, let us go back!" But having said that he realised his mistake. He had not been able to dispel the illusion completely. Even then he hoped that Sharvari would help him.

But she turned down his appeal. "If you are hesitating to answer my question," she went on, "I'll ask another. Has there ever been a time when a new person entered or an event occurred in your life and gave it a new turn?"

Chandrahas was confused again. His had been an unrestrained life. The straight line of existence had had no curves. No wave had disturbed the flow of the stream. No winds had ruffled the calm. There had been neither comet nor rainbow, thunder nor lightning in the sky. "No," he said, "there has been no such person or event in my life."

Just then Sovan came back to their table. "I don't think my friend will come today," he said, "so I'll say goodbye!" Chandrahas had planned that once Sovan left, they would check into the room he had booked earlier. But after that bizarre conversation with Sharvari he was unable to return suddenly to the ordinary. He asked Sovan to join them at the table.

"I hope I am not disturbing you again?" Sovan said. "No, the interview is over," Sharvari said. "However, I'd like to

ask one last question, if you don't mind. She looked at Chandrahas. "Have you ever regretted anything in your life?"

He sat up, alert. Now, he would take charge. He smiled faintly to make the situation easier. "Miss Yadav, what will you think if I do not answer that question?" he said. But Sharvari did not participate in his light-heartedness. "Silence is a statement too," she said.

She closed her notepad and replaced it in her bag. Then, draining her glass, she rose and said, "Countless thanks!" When she joined her hands to bid them namashkar, Chandrahas realised what was happening.

"May I escort you back?" he asked.

"No, thanks," she said, walking swiftly to the door. She opened the door and before Chandrahas could say anything, stepped out.

Folk Culture

I was returning to the village after years. I had hardly been back since I left school. After joining college and later, after I started working, contact with the village practically ceased. In fact we had given up the village much earlier. Our lands in the village had been sold and only the house remained. It was to sell the house that I was returning, on short leave from the office.

Actually, this wasn't our ancestral village. When my Father had worked as a postmaster in the area he had first acquired the lands cheaply and then got the house built. I was born in that village. When Father was transferred, we stayed on in the village. Slowly, we gave up our connections with other places and I went to school there. But we moved to the town after I joined college. Father rented a house there and we lost touch with the village. Occasionally, Father would go back to attend to the lands. Once in a while a tenant-farmer would bring us a bag of rice. Then, when the tenancy laws changed, Father gradually disposed of the lands; but the house he retained, in the hope that one of us might want to return some day.

Many years had passed. After Father's death it was only I who still had some interest in the village. I had pleasant

memories of my childhood and school days. Although I've been referring to it as "our" village, our house wasn't actually in the village. The people here were mostly low-caste and the question of our living *with* them did not arise. If Father hadn't got those lands so cheap he might have built his house elsewhere. We lived at one end, near a pond, a little removed from the village, thus enjoying at one and the same time, the advantages of being close as well as distant from the villagers.

Living with untouchables could have created social problems, but it did not bother us much. As Father was transferred frequently we did not have much to do with our relatives on either his or our mother's side and so there was little fear of our attracting criticism from others of our caste, on account of our lifestyle. We therefore had excellent relations with our neighbours. Most were landless labourers who survived by working on other people's land. There was a tiny school in the village. The village children went to the elementary classes there, but no one thought of going to the high school in a neighbouring village. As soon as they were old enough to work they took to the fields.

I had many friends in the village when I went to that school. A few of them did follow me to high school but not one of them stayed till the end. Childhood in those surroundings was happy. Memories of the open meadows, mango groves, the little stream, the low hills and the surrounding jungle returned often when we lived in that little house in town.

Festivals in the village were riots of celebration. Although the village did not have a proper temple there were numerous images of gods and goddesses in tiny shrines scattered all over and at festival time little fairs would spring up: priests appeared bearing flowers, incense and sandalwood paste; roosters were sacrificed, festoons of coloured paper were hung up and everyone wore bright clothes. Those were the happiest days for the children in the village.

The best-known of all the festivities was the Tiger Dance. In the month of Falgun, when there was no work to be done in the fields, the three-day festival began. Preparations had to be started about fifteen days earlier. Our Tiger Dance was famous for miles around. The dancers from our village performed in neighbouring villages and earned a decent income. The leader of the dancers was Raghu Chowkidar, who would start training the village boys, days in advance. Raghu Chowkidar looked after our lands and his son Gopal was with me in school, so they were practically a part of our family. I was therefore able to observe the Tiger Dance closely, from preparation to presentation.

It was really worth seeing. When fifteen to twenty young boys pranced about to the rhythm of drums and trumpets, bare bodies streaked black and yellow, the hearts of the spectators were filled with excitement and fear. Raghu and the village youth worked feverishly to make the dance a success. Raghu gave up food and drink for fifteen days and sat hugging his drum on the village common; anyone of the dancers who made a mistake during practice would receive a glare and a shouting. If he happened to visit our home during this time and Father asked him to do something he would say, "Let the dance be over."

That year, when Gopal started to learn the dance, we were jealous as well as surprised. He was of a flighty nature and took no interest in studies. Although he was much younger than the other dancers he was admitted to the troupe as he was Raghu Chowkidar's son. But he learnt fast and soon became famous as an outstanding performer. After he gave up school he devoted himself entirely to the dance. Whenever Raghu Chowkidar was unable to supervise the practice, Gopal took over.

When we left the village and moved to the town Father put Raghu in charge of our house and lands. A few years later

he died and Gopal inherited his responsibilities. That was the time, during my college days, when I returned once to the village. Gopal had the keys to our house and he looked after me during my stay in the village. But he had been very busy with the dance practice. I went once to watch them rehearse. The trainees had tremendous respect for Gopal and were highly enthusiastic about learning. Gopal was now known as Gopal Chowkidar, and that was how everyone addressed him. Some forgotten ancestor must have worked as the village chowkidar and the title had become hereditary.

This time I was returning to the village after ten or fifteen years. Gopal Chowkidar had been my sole contact with the village during all these years. I wrote to him occasionally about the upkeep of the house and sent him money for urgent repairs. I was happy now because I would meet him after so many years. When I got off the train that evening I expected to find Gopal at the station, but I was met by an unfamiliar young man of modern appearance who informed me he had been sent by Guru Gopal. When I asked about the bus to our village he told me he had already engaged a taxi for me. I was pleased at this sign of progress, because no taxis had been heard of in that region earlier. Even buses were infrequent. Moreover, earlier when we got off at a wayside halt we had to trudge through muddy fields to the village.

As we drove towards the village I was surprised to find that the road had improved beyond recognition. I asked my escort whether it had been rebuilt by the village panchayat and was told it had been paid for by some organisation in the United States. Before I could ask another question we had reached the village. It was as unrecognisable as the road had been. Much had changed, and the signs of prosperity were everywhere. The taxi came to a halt in front of our house. It too looked transformed. It had been newly white-washed; rooms had been added and the verandah was ablaze with

electric lights. Most surprising of all was the large signboard in front of the house, supported on two pillars, which proclaimed "Academy of Tiger Dance".

My amazement knew no limits when I saw a group of white people sitting on the verandah of the house. Fortunately, Gopal Chowkidar appeared just then and came up to me. He too was unrecognisable as he was dressed in the style of a classical musician. When I said, "Well, Gopal, how are you?" and hugged him he extended a hand and said, "Good morning", shaking my hand with the utmost cordiality! He then introduced me to the eight or ten foreigners who were sitting on the verandah and led me to the room where I was to stay. I was amazed as well as delighted to see him talking in fluent but totally incorrect English to the foreigners, who treated him with great reverence.

When we were alone in the room he told me about all that had happened. Apparently, the Tiger Dance had become world-famous during the intervening years and Raghu and his troupe received invitations to perform all over the country as well as overseas. He spent half the year abroad, teaching the dance to foreign students of both sexes, or performing with his troupe. Numerous overseas visitors were coming to our village as well, to learn the dance or to carry out research on it. Gopal had got our house repaired and was using it as a dance academy; it was he who would buy it off me now. When he asked me to come and watch the rehearsal that night I was surprised, for the Tiger Dance Festival was months away. But he explained that now the dance was performed round the year; the Festival itself had been shifted to the winter months as the overseas visitors found our summers too hot. "It's all written down here," he told me, handing me a little book, and walked out.

That book on the Tiger Dance told me many things I had not known before. The Tiger Dance, it stated, was a classical

dance form which had been revived when an ancient palm-leaf manuscript, the *Vyaghra Shastram* (the Scripture of the Tiger Dance) was discovered not long ago. In the period after its birth this dance had been confined to a single region — our village — and so had been corrupted through contact with local influences. The dance would have passed into oblivion had not the car transporting an American scholar broken down near our village, compelling him to spend a night there. Then followed the renaissance and revival of the dance in its pure form. To put it briefly, the dance had become famous through the dedication and inspiration of Guru Gopal and the American scholar.

I was delighted as well as saddened by the book. Delighted that the obscure dance from our village was now known all over the world and that my childhood friend was a celebrity; sad that the village which had been a token of the joys and excitement of childhood was no more and that our very own Tiger Dance had become public property. I comforted myself with the thought that things were changing everywhere; progress *had* to come and the old had to be replaced by the new.

I stepped out of the room, still thoughtful, and was approached by a white man. The camera, tape-recorder and notebook told me he was a researcher. Walking up to me he thrust a microphone into my face without so much as asking permission. "Are you Guru Gopal's landlord?" he asked. I was unable to reply immediately, for although Gopal held the keys to my house, the landlord-tenant relationship had not been established. He rephrased his question: "Are you the owner of the house that Guru Gopal is living in?" I nodded. Second question: "Are you a Brahmin or a Shudra?" Without waiting for my reply he asked again, "What's your gotra?" Then, leading me back into the room, he unslung his tape-recorder and plugged it into an electrical outlet. The interrogation began. Although I was feeling uncomfortable I

had to reply politely to all his questions, thinking this interview might help Gopal.

Fortunately, someone peeped in just then and announced that the rehearsal was about to begin. I got up, happy to escape. A large hall had been constructed at the other end of the village for dance practice. It was brightly lit up with electric lamps and within, on a low platform, sat Gopal Chowkidar, looking solemn as a dance maestro should. I sat down among the crowd of white spectators and looked around. A white man stood in one corner, armed with a camera, while a white girl with a tape-recorder sat at Gopal's feet, microphone in hand, looking at him with rapt attention. The dancers sitting in front of Gopal wore tiger costumes of velvet and their faces were covered with tiger masks. On Gopal's left sat eight musicians, ready to play on a variety of instruments, waiting for the guru's instructions.

When we were all seated, Gopal closed his eyes and chanted some mantras, then touched the earth with one finger and brushed his head with it. The dancers and the girl sitting at Gopal's feet touched his feet reverently, one by one. The music began and the dancers rose to dance. The dance was spectacular and fascinating. But this dance had no resemblance or kinship to the dance I had seen during my childhood. It did not touch the heart. When the dancers took off their masks after the dance I saw three foreigners, including a girl, among them.

My white tormentor now pursued me again with his questions. Although I managed to evade him, I was confronted by another white man. He informed me that he had been the first to rediscover the Tiger Dance. This man was much more refined than the one who had interrogated me and instead of annoying me with his questions he gave me much new information. He told me how Indian traditions of folk-culture were being obliterated for lack of institutions to preserve them. Many things had to be done to keep these traditions

uncorrupted or else elements of cheap popular culture would gradually creep in and transform them into forms of non-culture which would be mere parodies of art — such as the gradual disappearance of masks and costumes from the Tiger Dance. On hearing this I felt happy that the Tiger Dance had, through the efforts of these foreigners, been rescued from the clutches of our villagers and restored to its pristine form, to gain recognition abroad. I never asked myself what Raghu Chowkidar would have had to say on the matter had he been alive.

This was no longer the village of Raghu Chowkidar. It was an international art centre. The people of our village had no claims on the Tiger Dance. That belonged now to the art lovers of the world — a source of aesthetic delight and an object of scholarly research. The masked, costumed dancers did not belong to our village. They were our country's ambassadors of culture.

Reflecting on these matters, I found myself standing close to Gopal Chowkidar. The white girl who had been sitting at his feet still clung to him like a shadow. Gopal was holding up a tiger mask and explaining why the tiger's eyes were painted red. According to the *Natyashastra* created by the ancient sage Bharata, the red colour symbolised Cosmic Anger. The girl's face lit up with joy and she hastily scribbled something in her notebook, asking Gopal to pause in his exposition. On inquiring I was told that the girl had assigned herself the project of writing a comprehensive biography of Guru Gopal. When she found out that I had been a childhood friend of his, she asked me for an appointment for one whole day so that she could interview me.

We returned to our house at the far end of the village. The villagers had gone to sleep, and the winter night was quiet. As we walked through the mango grove, memories of dim moonlight, winter mists, the chirping of crickets, the smell of

moist earth, the flitting of bats through the branches, brought back my childhood. But the illusion was abruptly swept away with the glare of electric bulbs and the large signboard standing guard on the verandah, like a sentry.

When we sat down to eat Gopal asked me how long I planned to stay. But the cameras, tape-recorders and flash-bulbs of those dedicated researchers suddenly filled me with distaste. I felt uneasy in that environment. "My work is done," I told him, "I'll leave early tomorrow morning."

The Current

Sluggishly Manjari opened her eyes. Her lazy eyes suddenly discovered the outlines of a mottled watercolour in the surrealistic dusk sky. She turned over on her side to look at the rainbow in its entirety but the colours faded under the pressure of her gaze. She felt herself growing weightless and spread herself out on the grass, enjoying its intimate touch for the last time before sitting up.

She stood up and stretched, and rearranged the folds of her sari. It had been bright daylight when she lay down and closed her eyes. She must have dozed off because the shades of the evening were everywhere now. She could not see the others but could hear their voices in the distance. She decided that she would linger a little longer in this dream-like state before she made her return.

She walked on and sat down beside the stream. After staring at its flow for a few minutes she shut her eyes, as though wishing to imprint its rhythm and tune on her innermost being. When she opened her eyes again the stream was flowing steadily as before. She thought she would test the speed of its flow. She stretched out a foot but did not touch water. She did not feel like getting up and moving to some

other spot where she could dip into the stream. Pushing fear out of her mind she sprang into the water.

Despite the thrill of standing in the flowing current she uttered an involuntary scream. She looked around. The light had grown fainter and the surroundings even more deserted. But she felt no fear, only the joy of having been able to test the power of the stream. However, she experienced some doubt: she was unable to determine if the current was slow or swift. What standards could one apply to a stream flowing of its own will at dusk? Slower than what; swifter than whom? What was the measure of flow and impulse? Bending, she scooped up a handful of water in her cupped palm and splashed it on her face, appropriating to herself all the joyous movements of the stream.

That brought her back to the real world. All the participants at the literary meet had gone rambling in the woods nearby after the extended lunch. Manjari alone had strayed as far as the stream, leaving her friends behind. Two days in the company of writers, discussing literature, had left her exhausted. Mercifully, she had been able to escape the torment of literature for these few moments.

Now she wanted to climb out of the stream onto the bank. The task was not impossible; merely unrewarding. If somebody had held out a helping hand she could have grasped it and clambered up easily. While she was playing with these thoughts she heard a commotion nearby. Flustered, she looked up and saw her friends standing on the bank of the stream, laughing at her discomfiture. She stretched her hand out and was lifted out of the water by an undetermined hand.

It was Apurba's. Having helped her to dry ground he returned to an unfinished conversation with his friends. The others, having expressed their amusement, forgot about Manjari and started walking back for the evening session. There was no time for her to change her sari. Wet to the knees,

she sat in the rearmost row, but her mind was not on the proceedings. She thought of the circumstances which had brought her to this conference.

She had never attended these annual events before, though her friends had told her about it at some length. They used to meet earlier in a school building in some anonymous town; but once the minister for culture had the audacity to turn poet, everything changed. The conference moved to a large city; delegates were put up in starred hotels, carried around in airconditioned buses, etc. Whether the cause of literature was being served thereby remained uncertain, but for these few days practising poets felt they were equal to other privileged groups.

That year the conference had been convened in the picturesque surroundings of a tourist spot, far away from the city. Did the assembled guests experience the ethereal joys of paradise? No one knows, but the organisers had certainly exercised no austerity in selecting names for the different venues. The place itself was named Chaitrarath, the mythical garden of Kubera, God of Wealth. The hotel where the guests were accommodated was called Amravati; the restaurant wherein they dined was Kamadhenu, named after the divine cow whose unending supply of milk nourishes the immortals; and the hall in which delegates now sat raising momentous issues related to various aspects of poetry, was called Indrasabha — the Assembly of the Gods. The godlings and minor goddesses were now in an unholy rage because demons in the guise of critics had infiltrated their divine Nandan Kanan garden and were busy trampling the Parijata, the immortal flower of poetry. The matter under discussion was grave indeed; and yet some of the heavenly courtesans and musicians had deserted the hall in quest of refreshment and gathered in an adjoining chamber, the Kadambari Bar.

Manjari looked up at the dais. The paramount god Indra who presided over that divine assembly, the hon'ble minister for culture, was to leave for the capital that evening. He kept looking at his watch and his face showed he was totally indifferent to the discussion in progress and was probably thinking of other demons in the opposition whom he would have to face soon. Seated beside him was the principal organiser of the conference, universally acknowledged to be the sage Narada himself, mentor to the gods, carefully documenting in his notebook the feats of valour being performed in that running battle of words. The third gentleman on the dais was the oldest; with his flowing beard, long grey hair and his spotless white clothes, he resembled a wise rishi just risen from deep meditation. He had written the first and only literary work of his life during India's struggle for freedom, and although the poem or song was of the most inferior kind it was rumoured to have inspired thousands of martyrs to face the bullets of the police. He participated in every literary event and provided unintended entertainment by reciting the poem in a tremulous voice. Thus far he had not been given the opportunity to recite his poem at this conference and he seemed to be rehearsing it impatiently to himself.

Manjari opened her handbag and reassured herself that the poem she had written out so carefully was safe. She had not had a chance to present it as yet. As there were fewer listeners and more readers, every poet invited to the conference was anxious to stand up on the dais and recite his or her poem. Of course, each one claimed to have received requests from countless admirers for the poem being recited. Manjari felt dejected at first because she had never received such a request, but a friend cured her of this humility. Seeing Manjari depressed one day she said, "What an ass you are! Have you vowed to tell the truth always? Do you believe that people really get these letters from admiring fans? Why don't you follow the

others and talk about your mountains of fan mail?" Manjari, who had never thought on these lines, began like the rest to talk glowingly of herself; but being timid, she never claimed to have received more than three postcards and half a dozen international airmail letters in praise of the poem she had written for the Puja issue of a popular magazine.

She was timid and hesitant in everything. That was probably why she had remained single. She could neither decide to accept the match her parents had arranged nor find herself a suitor. An unwritten law among litterateurs makes it impossible to be a poet unless one takes to the bottle; but as our society discourages drinking by women, a budding poetess must find a substitute for alcohol, which is to fall in love. All her friends, married or single, plain or attractive, young or aged, related to Manjari tales of having fallen in love, of being in love, of experiences and possibilities. Of course, she had occasional doubts about the veracity of these narrations; but when they questioned her about her own love life, she was unable to invent affairs of the heart, as fictitious as her fan mail, just in order to satisfy them.

She concluded that she must be dry and dull as well as timid and hesitant. She had been self-reliant even as a child, never allowing herself to be swept away by her dreams. When she decided therefore, to accept the appointment as a lecturer in a remote college instead of getting married, her parents acquiesced. She had had many opportunities to meet young men, but was never attracted to any of them. She found them all irresponsible, grasping and opportunistic. One could amuse oneself by talking casually to them for an hour or two, but nothing more. And so, while her friends repeatedly fell in and out of love, Manjari never indulged in this pastime with any of her male companions. Her friends were positive that her life would turn into a blighted, loveless desert.

Then one day she astonished them not by falling in love but by writing a poem. A new theme; novel diction. A poem of social awareness and evaluation, steeped in feminine sensibility. And love. The few poems she wrote, quickly made her famous. Many praised them but others said enviously that she would never have found such ready acceptance but for her gender. At any rate, her poetry could not be ignored; she soon became an inalienable part of the establishment. She had found something to keep her occupied in her otherwise dull existence.

She emerged from her own thoughts now to focus on the programme. Few of the participants appeared to be interested in the discussion; they were engaged in private conversation in groups. She tried to concentrate on the topic of discussion. The speaker on the dais was a critic who had once written poetry. He was describing how he had ventured into the temple of Saraswati, Goddess of Poetry, with a few floral offerings of verse, only to find the shrine desecrated by a variety of poetasters. The sacrilege had made him repudiate poetry and turn into a critic. Members of the audience who had been listening laughed at this revelation; others who were paying no attention joined in the chorus of amusement.

Manjari looked at her watch. It was eight; the discussion had been in progress for an hour and a half, but no conclusion was in sight. Manjari thought it would be proper to change out of her damp sari before she went for dinner. She looked around and was relieved to find it was possible for her to slip away quietly. She searched for Rekha, who was sharing her room, but could not find her. Anyway, she had the key to the room safe in her bag. When the speaker drew another round of laughter and applause, she used the opportunity to make her exit unnoticed.

Manjari found the door to her room unlocked. Rekha sat at the table, absorbed in writing something. "Have you started

writing your diary before the day is over?" Manjari asked. Rekha turned around and smiled, but went back to her writing. Not wishing to disturb her Manjari approached her own bed and opened her suitcase to take out a fresh sari. A little later Rekha shut her notebook, got up and walked up to Manjari. With a mysterious smile she said, "Congratulations!" When Manjari looked at her with a question in her eyes she said, "Don't pretend, Manju Apa! We know everything!" Annoyed, Manjari said, "What is it you know?" and Rekha answered, "As if you don't know! You want *me* to tell you, don't you? Very well! I congratulated you because Apu held your hand today, Manju Apa!"

Manjari, who was about to laugh, became serious. Such banter is common when women get together. The most casual of contacts is spiced into a romantic episode. In any gathering of writers, fictional tales of love soon begin to sprout. Poets are sentimental people and the opportunity to mix freely with members of the opposite sex generates a wave of romantic feeling. Manjari had never been to a conference where rumours of a tempestuous new saga of love did not grow around some young girl and young man. Such stories are seen by many, including the victims, as tributes rather than libel. Manjari had not been spared either, but her unromantic image had not encouraged the rumours and they died a premature death. But she was reluctant to laugh away the charge that Rekha had made. The reason being Apu.

Some poets become famous through their poetry while others are celebrated for their poetic lifestyle. Apurba fell into the second category. He had once written good poetry and occasionally produced a few poems even now but he was regularly found at conferences, poetically dressed, reciting his poems elegantly. Little was known about his personal life but it was rumoured he had a wife and family back home in the village though he led a bachelor's existence in the city. Being

an insurance agent he did not require a formal office and was not bound by normal constraints of time and place. He was a welcome visitor at all literary conferences on account of his affability and bohemian living. But what had made him both famous and notorious was his propensity to get romantically linked with numerous women. Although Manjari had met him before, their encounters had been extremely formal and she had, in fact, kept her distance on account of his reputation. He had never tried to become friendly and she thought this was best. But a strange feeling of resentment rose within her when she saw him chatting merrily to other girls. She was invariably critical, for no good reason, of both Apurba and his poetry when talking to friends.

Finding Manjari silent, Rekha said, "Well, Manjari Apa, what do you have to say now? We never suspected you were so deep!" Gathering her wits Manjari replied, "What rubbish you and your friends talk! Do you have nothing better to do than to count the feathers of flying birds? And now you've turned your gossip onto me! I suppose you'll start the rumour that I'd jumped into the water to commit suicide and someone rescued me." "Well said, Manju Apa!" Rekha said, clapping her hands. "Now why hadn't *I* thought of that! Give me a minute, will you, while I jot that down in my diary!" "What does your diary have to do with this?" Manjari asked. "Well, today's page in my diary is devoted entirely to you and Apurba!" Rekha explained. "Shall I read it out to you?"

"Okay, that's enough!" Manjari said angrily. "Get out of the room and let me change. We have to go for dinner."

Seated in the bathtub, pouring water over herself, Manjari thought she could have bathed in the stream. And instantly, she felt the tingle of the flowing current. Then, drying herself with a towel, she looked in the mirror. Wasn't she attractive still, despite the passing years? She certainly looked more attractive than many of her younger friends. Alternately

narrowing and widening her eyes, admiring herself from different angles, propping up her breasts, Manjula told herself her time was not over yet. But would she be able to make the best use of the time that remained? She had not lacked devotees. There were many who flattered her as a matter of routine; many who touched her furtively when the opportunity arose; many who sent her verses of love, who would sit gazing at her face admiringly. But none had been able to touch her heart; they were only frivolous suitors roaming desultorily on the perimeter of her life, with whom she could at best develop five minutes of superficial closeness. The only exception she had found was a writer named Chandan, who had written her letters of deep admiration after the publication of each new poem. But beyond greeting her affectionately at every meeting he had never expressed anything, though he continued to hover around her. Everyone was of the opinion that he was extremely courteous and responsible, as well as a good writer; but amusement was the only feeling he inspired in her. Mutual friends had tried to bring them together, informing Manjari of Chandan's infatuation. "Poor man!" was all she said in response. The contact had never blossomed into a scandal.

As they were walking towards the restaurant for dinner Rekha said, "Manju Apa, let's have a drink to celebrate today's events." "Have you started drinking then?" Manjari asked.

"Poor Manju Apa! You don't know what's going on, do you?" Rekha said. "Everyone drinks here, although some do it secretly. Take your friend, Suramanini, for instance. She spends two hours every morning praying to her favourite gods, but if someone were to mix a little rum in her cola, she wouldn't object. And as for the others!"

"You love destroying reputations, don't you?" Manjari said.

"Okay, just come with me to the Kadambari Bar if you don't believe me!" Rekha challenged her.

On any other day Manjari would have refused. But now she said, "Very well, let's go."

The dimly lit bar was overflowing. The entire hotel had been booked for the conference and now all the delegates seemed to have deserted the pursuit of poetry and flocked to the bar. A couple of young men gave up their seats for Manjari and Rekha. When she had adjusted to the dim light, Manjari found a number of her friends around her. They all had glasses in their hands and though one could not be sure of the contents, the loudness and intensity of the conversation suggested that the atmosphere, if not the beverage, was highly stimulating! When two glasses appeared unasked for on their table, Rekha picked up hers but Manjari said, "No, I'd like to order my own drink." "Worried about the bill?" someone asked from a neighbouring table. "Everything's on the house tonight! The minister had to leave in a hurry, but he's paying for all the drinks." The waiter reappeared with the tray and before Manjari had time to think she found herself holding a glass. A chorus of "Cheers!" went up; Manjari lifted the glass to her lips but did not sip; the acrid smell of whisky was overpowering. She put the glass down on the table and leaned back in her chair. Rekha said, "Drink it up, Manju Apa! Everyone's looking at you." All eyes were, in fact, trained on her. "Come on, Manjari; be a sport! Take a sip!" several voices shouted in chorus. One was that of Chandan. His presence in that crowd did not please her and she gave him a sharp look. The cheerful expression on his face suddenly wilted and he got up and left; but the others were in no mood to accept defeat. The more she resisted the louder grew their demand. Helpless, she glanced at the adjoining table, where Apurba was sitting with some friends. They had surely witnessed the drama because Apurba rose, walked up to the bar and returned with a tall glass which he deposited on Manjari's table, saying, "This contains only Cola." A burst of laughter went up again. Now there were two glasses confronting

Manjari. Apurba stood beside her, as though directing the proceedings; everyone was looking at Manjari's hand. She looked around, ignoring Apurba, lifted the glass of whisky to her lips and said, "Cheers!"

Amid the din of applause Manjari took a couple of quick gulps. Holding Manjari's hand in both of hers, Rekha whispered into her ear: "Well done, Manju Apa! You've shown everyone the stuff you're made of!" Ignoring her impertinent flattery Manjari looked at Apurba's table, thinking that he, like Chandan, might have been hurt by her slight. But he was busy chatting away merrily with his friends, male as well as female. Manjari was displeased.

Apart from the unpleasant taste, Manjari found no other sensation in her first strong drink. She joined her other friends at dinner, conversed normally and returned with Rekha to her room. When she had changed and was ready to go to bed Rekha said, "It's only eleven — too early to sleep. Come, Manju Apa, let's talk; this is our last night here!" "Okay," Manjari said, "You talk and I'll listen from my bed."

"Don't mind my asking a personal question, Manju Apa. Have you never been in love?"

"No," Manjari said, intending to cut the topic short.

"Then how are you able to write all these love poems addressed to a 'You'?"

"Is there a ban on writing love poems unless one is in love? The 'You' could be intended for God, couldn't it? Mind you, there are poems which look as though they're addressed to God but are really meant for a lover."

"You're right, Manju Apa! All those poems addressed to a 'You' which Salila writes are not really intended for God; they're all addressed to Apurba."

The intrusion of Apurba's name into the conversation annoyed Manjari. "The way you talk, one would think it's impossible to be a writer unless you're having an affair!"

"Well, I don't know about the others," Rekha said, "but tell me, Manju Apa, is it possible for a poet to keep her emotions under control? Is there a poet who's not in love?" And Rekha rolled out a long list of versifiers from both sexes who were known to be in the throes of love. Not a single woman-poet known to Manjari was missing from the list; some, in fact, were credited with multiple lovers. Rekha also had a list of specific love poems addressed to particular persons, as well as the names of the persons who had inspired such poems. Although Manjari found the enumeration absorbing she pretended to be displeased and said, "You seem to have all the latest gossip! What about yourself?"

Rekha was silent for a few minutes. Then, with a sigh she said, "If I were to start talking about myself, Manju Apa, it would take all night. Everything that happened before I was married; how I got married and what has transpired since. It's all a long story!"

"Even *after* your marriage?" Manjari asked with fake surprise.

"You don't understand these things, Manju Apa," Rekha said. "What does being married have to do with falling in love? Do you think Cupid is frightened away by a spot of sindoor on a married woman's forehead? Besides, if we poets do not experience forbidden love, who will?"

"All right," Manjari said. "Now tell me about yourself. And if there isn't time enough to talk about all your lovers, tell me about the most recent one."

"Well, I'd like to tell you everything," Rekha said. "But if I do, I'm afraid you'll find out who it is."

"No names then," Manjari said. "I'm not interested anyway. Just tell me what happened."

"Who do you suppose it could have been, Manju Apa?" Rekha asked, making a sudden U-turn.

"How on earth should *I* know?" Manjari said.

"Guess!"

"I don't even want to try."

"I'll give you a clue, Apa. The gentleman is present here!"

"Is it Apurba?" Manjari asked, not wishing to continue the charade. She was ill-informed about these literary romances.

Rekha got up, walked across to Manjari's bed, lay down and put her arms around Manjari. "How did you guess, Manju Apa?" she squealed. "Someone must have told you! Swear!"

"Why on earth should anyone tell me?" Manjari said. "Is it true then?"

Rekha sat up, looking grave. "It *could* have been, Manju Apa. But I said No!"

"Said No to whom?"

"When Apu started chasing me I told him straightaway 'I'm not like the other girls. If you want a relationship with me you'll have to give up the others!' That put an end to everything."

Manjari could not decide whether she should believe Rekha. "Okay, let's drop that topic!" she said. "Now tell me about your most recent lover."

"No, Apa," Rekha said. "Some other day, maybe. I've no secrets from you. But the mood is gone now. You've opened old wounds by asking about Apurba!"

"Very well, go to sleep then," Manjari said.

"So early? Just look up and see the moonlight outside! No one could be sleeping now; they must be chatting or taking a stroll. You can go to sleep if you like; I'm off!" And Rekha walked out of the room abruptly.

Against her will Manjari found herself thinking of Apurba. All that Rekha had told her might be untrue, but she had heard things about Apurba before. His conduct at this conference wasn't to her liking either. Remembering what had happened earlier that evening Manjari told herself, "What does he think of himself anyway!" Such a person could start chasing anyone!

Lucky it wasn't her! Except of course for the two incidents of him lifting her by the hand out of the stream and of fetching a glass of Cola for her in the bar! Of course, neither of these actions could be called rude. But then who would dare be rude to her? She was not like other girls, who attracted men like flies. Not even someone like Rekha. Well, Rekha might be younger, but she was definitely shorter in height and had an uninteresting complexion too. She was definitely better-looking than Rekha.

But why was she thinking of such things? Had the whisky gone to her head? She wouldn't have dreamt of doing such a thing a few years earlier, but now everything was permissible. The whisky had given her no pleasure. She could have done without it! There was the glass of Cola in front of her; but in her wilfulness she had gulped the whisky down. Who was she trying to subdue? Apurba? Apurba again! What was he to her?

She sat up in bed. She looked out of the window: the night was really awash in moonlight. Rekha was right: this was no time to sleep. She should have gone out with Rekha. She felt lonely and was suddenly angry with the whole world. She changed quickly into a fresh sari, as though she had to rush out and settle some terribly complicated problem immediately. The list on the table showed the room numbers of the other delegates. Apurba was in Room 12. Should she confront him at once and ask him to explain his behaviour that evening?

She stepped out of the room: everything was quiet and peaceful. She walked towards the sheet of moonlight outside. People were sitting on the grass in groups, chatting. But she did not join them; she chose a vacant bench. Closing her eyes she sat soaking up the moonlight. She felt better. She was not aware of how long she had been there, but felt it was time to go. There were still some people strolling or sitting. She walked back into the lobby, towards her room. There it was:

Room 12. The door was open and she walked in unthinkingly. There was no one inside. She sat down on a chair and picked up a piece of paper lying on the table. Only one line had been scribbled on it: the opening line of a poem:

She listens to no one, my sulking love

Her eyesight was failing her; she should get herself a new pair of glasses. Bifocals at thirty-seven instead of forty? She put the sheet of paper down, got up and walked back to her own room. Rekha was fast asleep in the bed next to hers. She looked very pretty now, as innocent and vulnerable as a child. Manjari touched her fondly on the cheek and carried her fingers to her lips in a loving kiss. Then she went to the table, sat down and started writing a letter on a blank sheet of paper.

Dear Apu. I had so much to say to you, which must remain unsaid this time. Who knows when we shall meet again? But do write. Here is my address, below. I shall wait for your letter. Your sulking one.

She wrote out her address, folded the sheet of paper and put it into an envelope on which she wrote Apurba's name. Tomorrow they would all go their separate ways. She put the envelope under her pillow and went to sleep. She would hand it over personally to Apurba next morning.

The Lackey

Just as Sudhakar was leaving for the office that morning his wife said to him, "Well, it's just as well that after today you won't have to go off in such a rush every morning." Sudhakar turned his head around to look at her. It was normal for Renuka to make some such disagreeable remark just as he was leaving home. Sudhakar wondered if she had ever said anything to him which was not a veiled taunt. Every exchange between husband and wife is generally ambiguous; something is said but the meaning intended is something else. Whenever Renuka spoke to him, Sudhakar had to figure out her real meaning. Even the simplest, most direct statement from her, he felt, invariably concealed some cunning intent. When she said, "The foundation for Harish Babu's house was laid today," Sudhakar paraphrased this as, "All your friends have built houses, but you are so incompetent that you haven't even acquired a piece of land." Renuka said, "Get some fresh vegetables on your way home from the office." Sudhakar's translation: "The shopkeepers in town know what a nincompoop you are and will fob off their rotten goods on you." And so on.

On any other day he would have reacted silently to her words with a look of mild annoyance but this morning he was

genuinely depressed. This was the last day in office for his boss, the "Burra Sahib". His successor had not been named as yet and there were various speculations; but this was not what worried Sudhakar. His problem was a feeling of emptiness that overcame him on contemplating life without the great man. For more than twenty years he had offered up his life to the sahib. It was he who presided over Sudhakar's sorrows and joys, his wants and deprivations, and Sudhakar had happily surrendered his life and destiny into the sahib's keeping.

Today, Sudhakar remembered the time when he had started working under Mr Nayak. The boss had acquired notoriety as a bad-tempered, foul-mouthed, ill-mannered official and no private secretary survived long under him. One of his subordinates was rumoured to have collapsed of a heart attack brought about by his abusive tongue. After a few days under him, his private secretaries invariably went on long leave, on a variety of excuses. Sudhakar's appointment as private secretary to Mr Nayak was the culmination of a convoluted bureaucratic process. He was chosen on account of his reputation as a calm, innocent, long-suffering minion who slaved like a donkey and never applied for leave, whatever the circumstances.

At first Sudhakar found it difficult to adjust to Mr Nayak's ways. When he had gone to pay his respects for the first time Mr Nayak scrutinised him from top to toe, puffed twice on his cigarette, flicked the ash away and said, "I hadn't asked for you, so I'm not to blame for your misfortune. However, I want you to know: if you ever apply for leave, it will not be granted. Moreover, I shall draw up proceedings against you." Although shaken, Sudhakar managed a wan smile and said, "No Sir, why should I apply for leave?"

When he was dismissed from the sahib's presence he found the other clerks waiting in the common office. A fellow-clerk who had been humiliated by Mr Nayak earlier asked

"What did the sala say to you?" Sudhakar lied hurriedly, "He asked about my previous postings." Another victim asked, "Did he talk about drawing up proceedings?" Sudhakar turned red, thinking his lie had been detected. Wiping the sweat away he said, "No, why should he talk about proceedings?" And another well-informed colleague added, "Let us hope you can survive under the rogue!"

Sudhakar survived so well that he spent the next twenty years or more under Mr Nayak. During this period Mr Nayak was transferred many times, promoted frequently, but he never parted with Sudhakar. On each transfer he carried Sudhakar with him; when Sudhakar was promoted, Mr Nayak saw to it that a new post was created for him. They were like a preordained pair tied inseparably to each other for life.

This long period had brought Sudhakar happiness as well as suffering. Mr Nayak's notoriety was well-deserved and he was universally detested. No one went to see him in his office unless it was absolutely necessary. Consequently, anyone who had to deal with him sought Sudhakar's help, for he alone was close to the sahib. Sudhakar had limitless prestige in any office presided over by Mr Nayak. He was the only channel that provided access to the boss. Even top industrialists or bureaucrats who were obliged to meet Mr Nayak made it a point to call on Sudhakar on the way out. "How are you Sudhakar Babu? Is everything well?" they never forgot to ask. And Sudhakar enjoyed the ritual and derived the fullest benefit from this system.

But nothing in the world is obtained without a cost. Every article carries a price tag and every joy comes attached with corresponding sorrow. To achieve his influence in the office Sudhakar did not only have to labour incessantly; he had to suffer the sahib's outrageous temper. The vile abuse, the files flung at him in anger. Mr Nayak possessed every skill needed to crush a subordinate. Sometimes he would summon Sudhakar

to the office at eight in the morning, on the pretext of some urgent business. Sudhakar made it a point to reach the office on the dot, having been grossly humiliated once for being late. The boss, however, would appear only at ten and Sudhakar was made to realise that the whole purpose of the exercise was to harass him. Similarly, Mr Nayak would often remain in the office until late hours and keep Sudhakar tied to his desk, although there was no work to be done. In addition, Sudhakar had to suffer the sahib's abuse everyday, with or without cause. The tone and language in which the indignity was handed out made Sudhakar resolve, each time, to go on long leave.

Rude officials who routinely humiliate their subordinates generally set a limit to their own crudity. That limit depends on the perceived tolerance of the subordinate. Mr Nayak had realised this early in his career. Once, shortly after he had moved into a new post, he summoned the private secretary and flung a ten-rupee note at him, with the barked command, "Get me five envelopes!" Instead of picking up the note gratefully as Mr Nayak had expected, the robust young man stood erect confronting him and looked him straight in the eye. Suppressing the fear which he suddenly experienced, Mr Nayak was thinking of an appropriate insult when his subordinate told him, "This is not part of my official duties!" and left abruptly. Mr Nayak was silenced for a moment. Luckily for him the man had not picked up the note and asked him to stuff it back into his pocket! Mr Nayak managed to get him transferred, using all his skills, and found a replacement. But the lesson he taught himself was always to test a subordinate's tolerance and strength before venturing to torment him. Perhaps it was because of this simple lesson that innocuous persons such as Sudhakar, were subjected to his insults.

Maturity and experience had also taught Mr Nayak that a person could be turned into a slave not only through

punishment and abuse but also through an occasional favour. When he tried out this strategy on Sudhakar he found himself completely successful. In addition to threats and insults, detention in the office, denial of leave even when urgently required, adverse comments in the character roll, he used the occasional carrot. Sudhakar was overwhelmed with gratitude when the sahib arranged for a telephone to be installed in his quarters. When he conveyed the news proudly to Renuka she said, "Good! Now he can summon you in the middle of the night!" And in fact the sahib did use the phone to summon him at the most awkward of times. He frequently dictated memos to Sudhakar over the phone and Sudhakar would have to wait for his call with pencil and notebook in hand. Once when Mr Nayak was unable to contact Sudhakar on the phone he said, "I think I should get your telephone removed!" That telephone was the symbol of Sudhakar's prestige and influence among his neighbours. The fear of losing it drove him to protest to the sahib but all he could articulate was a "Sir!" in which fear, humility and meekness were blended.

The telephone was spared but Mr Nayak had discovered a new weapon to keep Sudhakar terrorised. At the end of each month Sudhakar found himself deeper in Mr Nayak's debt because the telephone had not been taken away. The sahib would perpetuate the burden of gratitude through occasional acts of kindness: he had brought some perfume for Sudhakar's wife from a trip overseas; Sudhakar's promotion in service was rapid and he earned more from overtime work than his colleagues. Once, when Sudhakar was ill, Mr Nayak even paid a visit to his home, to the consternation of his neighbours and fellow-clerks. After several bouts of ferocious verbal assault he would suddenly ask Sudhakar, "Have you managed to get your son admitted to the college?" And Sudhakar's gloomy face would light up with gratitude.

But now when Sudhakar recalled the last twenty years it was not the occasional happy memory that surfaced but only the unpleasant and painful experiences. For instance, he had once been summoned five minutes after he had directed a visitor to the sahib's office. The visitor was walking out as Sudhakar entered and his face showed that the visit had not been pleasant. Mr Nayak was fuming. As soon as he saw Sudhakar his anger erupted. "How much did that man pay you for helping him to see me?" he shouted.

"Sir?" was all that Sudhakar could say in surprise. "You clerks are growing fat on bribes from businessmen!" Mr Nayak roared. "Who asked you to send that man to me? I'll hand each one of you over to the vigilance department!" "No, sir ..." Sudhakar began but Mr Nayak's growl cut him short. "How did that fellow know his file had come to me?" And he flung the file at Sudhakar saying, "Put this in the cupboard and don't take it out until I order you to do so! These crooks think they can buy everyone with their money! Bastard!" The last epithet was intended for the businessman but addressed to Sudhakar. He picked up the file from the floor, put it in the cupboard and walked back towards his cubicle. His ears were burning and he held back his tears with difficulty. No, he would surely go on leave this time!

He rinsed his face in the toilet and went back to his desk, telling his colleagues nothing about the insult. But he told Renuka everything that evening. For some time now he had never spoken to her about Mr Nayak because the mere mention of his name enraged her. Ever since he had started working for Mr Nayak, Sudhakar returned late from the office. He had no time for the home or the children; all he could talk about was Mr Nayak. Renuka found this intolerable. At first he had always told Renuka of the nagging he received from the boss but all she said was, "Serves you right! What praises of the boss you sang! Now I hope you're satisfied!"

After a few days of this Sudhakar stopped telling his wife of the unpleasant things, only revealing the sahib's charitable acts. But whenever he returned from the office depressed, she knew at once that Mr Nayak had abused him. "Why are you silent today?" she taunted him. "Don't you want to tell me about the words of love you heard from the sahib?"

Sometimes Sudhakar was so upset that he vowed he would never tell her anything about the sahib. But how could this be? How could he not talk about the god who ruled his life as well as the office? How could he keep to himself, locked up in his breast, all the important facts about the sahib's tours, his illness, his son's appointment to a new job, the new furniture in his office, the letter of reprimand he had written to a subordinate? But Renuka would immediately get to the bottom of everything and find fault with Sudhakar. She would say, "When the sahib's dog was sick you spent more time nursing him than you did Munu when he had jaundice!" Or she would say, when he told her of the sahib's promotion, "Why don't you make an offering in the temple to celebrate this? Distribute sweets among the poor! We will get a share of the sahib's salary, won't we?" And so on.

There was another reason for Renuka's dislike of Mr Nayak, which she had never disclosed to Sudhakar. Years ago, he had visited them one afternoon when Sudhakar was ill. Sudhakar had been lying in bed, weak with fever, and there was no one else at home. She had offered Mr Nayak a cup of tea; he had inquired after Sudhakar's welfare and asked to be informed immediately if any need arose. When he got up to leave she escorted him to the door and it was then that he put an arm around her shoulder and made a casual attempt to draw her towards him, letting her go before she could react, and then making a hurried exit.

A few moments earlier he had spoken to her with such exemplary courtesy that she almost began to feel guilty about

her uncharitable attitude towards him. She had found nothing to dislike in him; if he had put his hand on her shoulder in Sudhakar's presence she might even have leaned towards him in a gesture of contrition. But in trying to take advantage of her helplessness he had been indescribably boorish and obscene. She thought she would immediately tell Sudhakar what had happened, but he was in no condition to listen to her. She had not found an opportunity to tell him after he recovered. When such an incident occurs the victim often begins to see it in a different light, a few days later. Renuka did not find the incident as insulting and vulgar subsequently as on that day. On the contrary, she sometimes wondered what might have happened if she *had* leaned forward. However, she resolved never to tell Sudhakar. She knew him so well that she could predict his reaction. He might have told her, "Maybe he dared to do such a thing because you offered some encouragement." Or, he might have attempted to draw Renuka into the relationship that existed between the sahib and him by saying, "No, no, you've misunderstood him! He couldn't have had any evil intention! If you invite him home again you'll find out what a gentleman he is!" At any rate, she never discussed the incident with Sudhakar, though she was unable to dismiss it from her mind.

When Sudhakar told her how the sahib had accused him of taking a bribe, she offered no sympathy. "You deserve it!" she said bitterly. "What did I tell you? Well, enough loyalty to the devil! It's time you found a new boss. But you find your heaven there, don't you? Well, go and lick his feet! Listen to his abuses!" Sudhakar walked away into the adjoining room, depressed. But Renuka had not finished. She followed him and asked, "Did you really accept money for arranging a meeting with the sahib?"

Sudhakar also remembered the occasion when the sahib had addressed him using the insulting "tu" pronoun. He had

barely started working for Mr Nayak. An urgent memo had to be sent to the minister; he took Mr Nayak's dictation, typed out the memo, obtained his signature and had it despatched. Unfortunately, a major typing error had gone unnoticed. When the file returned from the minister's office Mr Nayak was horrified to find that the minister had personally drawn a circle around the error, put a number of question marks in the margin alongside and written an ironical note underneath the memo ridiculing its author. Summoning Sudhakar to his office Mr Nayak assailed fourteen generations of his ancestors in unspeakable terms; when he had finished, he asked, "Do *you* want me to be dismissed?"

In those early days Sudhakar used to narrate everything to Renuka in detail. Renuka had not then developed her violent dislike of Mr Nayak but on listening to Sudhakar's account she said, "I don't think your boss is treating you properly. You've been telling me no one was able to survive under him. Why don't you go on leave and ask for a transfer?"

He had done neither of these things. Timid by nature, he felt that asking the sahib for leave would look like a comment on his bad behaviour. Moreover, he had immense faith in his own powers of endurance. Well, the sahib might have spoken to him in anger occasionally; but what was the point in nursing an injury? He tried to explain his point of view to Renuka. When she reminded him of all the humiliation he had been subjected to, he said: "Yes, true; but don't forget, he helped me to draw money out of my provident fund." But she was not convinced. "Did the money belong to his father?" she asked angrily. "You drew your own money; why do you have to thank the sahib for that?"

But despite all her admonition he was unable to break loose. He remained Mr Nayak's humble slave for all his mistreatment. He rejoiced when the sahib was promoted, suffered agonies when the sahib's proposals were turned down

by higher-ups. When the sahib's daughter was married it was Sudhakar who took charge. When, at last, the sahib allowed him to draft short letters independently he felt he had conquered some impregnable fortress. The sahib's approval of the drafts that he had prepared with such labour and devotion made him ecstatic, and when the sahib was dissatisfied, for whatever reason, his day turned drab and miserable.

As the day of Mr Nayak's retirement drew nearer, its shadow fell across the world of Sudhakar's joys and sorrows. When the sahib was pleased with him, he thought: How soon this happiness will end! And when the sahib abused him he said to himself: Only two more months of this and I shall be delivered! But on that last day, none of these memories visited him. The person who had dominated his thoughts, his consciousness, his mind and his soul was leaving him orphaned! When he was arranging the papers in the sahib's office and later, listening to the words of insincere praise spoken in farewell, he told himself the administration had done Mr Nayak injustice in compelling such a healthy, able and competent person to retire merely because he had arrived at a certain age.

After the farewell meeting for the sahib that evening he wandered aimlessly through the streets instead of going home. Suddenly, he looked at his watch and discovered it was ten o' clock already. He returned home. Renuka had been sitting up, waiting. The moment he entered she said "You've finished the sahib's work, haven't you? Good, now go and sleep in peace!" He had his dinner and went to bed but was unable to sleep. After a restless night he got up and dressed, but he did not feel like going to the office. If Renuka hadn't watched every step he took, he might even have gone on leave and spent the day at home; but he was compelled to go to the office. Mr Nayak's successor had not arrived and everyone in the office seemed to be celebrating his departure. But there

was no pleasure for Sudhakar. He left the office before closing time and went to Mr Nayak's residence.

Mr Nayak had been waiting for him. He did not seem happy to see Sudhakar; instead, he said tauntingly, "Well, well, Sudhakar Babu; you seem to have had a busy day in the office! I've been waiting for you all morning!" And Sudhakar, as was his habit, fabricated an excuse for himself, saying, "Sir, I wasn't feeling well and so I went a little late to the office." Mr Nayak, seeing through the excuse as usual, said, "Very well, from tomorrow, come here first, before you go to the office." And then he said, "I have to send a letter to the bank; take this dictation, will you?" Sudhakar had not brought his stenographer's pad; he took a scrap of paper out of his pocket and took Mr Nayak's dictation in shorthand. Before the sahib could pull him up, he said, "Sir, I'll remember to bring my pad along in future."

When he completed the sahib's work and returned home it was late evening, as usual. He had hoped that Renuka would not be able to guess where he had been. But one look at his face told her everything; the lie he had been rehearsing was stillborn. He was still thinking of an appropriate excuse when she said, "How long will it take you to complete all his remaining work? If you have to serve two sahibs now, I suppose we will never get to see you at home!" Trying to appease her, Sudhakar said philosophically, "You know, once an officer retires, he is ignored by everyone. So I thought I would go and look him up at least." Renuka replied, "Who would mind being ignored if he had a devoted slave like you to serve him?" "Well, it's just a few small matters I have to wrap up for him," Sudhakar said. "It'll all be over in a day or two."

But it didn't end in a day or two. Every morning Sudhakar went dutifully to Mr Nayak's residence on his way to the office, though it meant that he had to leave home an hour

earlier and pedal an extra two kilometres. He carried the tasks that Mr Nayak gave him to the office. Mr Nayak continued to occupy the government quarters allotted to him, but had stealthily started working for some commercial organisation. He got Sudhakar to type all his correspondence. Once, when Sudhakar was a little slow, Mr Nayak threatened him. Once he promised, "Sudhakar, if the work increases, I'll see that you are paid." But Sudhakar declined the offer firmly, saying, "No, sir, you've done enough for me already. Please don't talk about payment."

And in fact Mr Nayak never raised the issue again. But he began to hector and torment Sudhakar as before. The old routine was revived for Sudhakar: abuse, the occasional kind word, and more abuse. He kept his contacts with the new sahib to the essential minimum. He went to the office punctually, did his work conscientiously, but the god presiding over his life was not the new sahib: it was Mr Nayak. Renuka interrogated him for a time and then said in disgust: "You will be rid of Mr Nayak's ghost only when he is dead!" He protested, "What inauspicious things you say about the gentleman!"

One morning, when Sudhakar went to Mr Nayak's residence he was told that he had suffered a heart attack the night before and had been admitted to the hospital. His head was in a whirl when he heard this. He managed to ring up the office to take leave and cycled to the hospital. He searched out the coronary diseases ward and found Mr Nayak's wife and children sitting on the verandah with dismal faces. Mr Nayak had been taken to the Intensive Care Unit, where visitors were not allowed. He offered his namashkars to the family and stood there for a while with lowered head. Then he came out. As he was leaving the hospital compound he ran into a relative of Mr Nayak's, who informed him that the chances of survival were slight. Sudhakar felt too weak to

stand up. He trundled his bicycle all the way home, unable to get onto the seat. His limbs seemed devoid of all life.

He told Renuka he had come home early as he wasn't feeling well. He changed and got into bed. There was an oppressive feeling in his breast when he breathed. With his hand on his chest he told Renuka, "I feel very unwell; ring up the doctor at once."

The Wish Fulfilled

Basudev had put together a comprehensive and carefully thought-out list of all the important projects that he would engage himself in, once he retired. The list included, in addition to social service, literary activity and scholarly research, such straightforwardly materialistic and utilitarian occupations as adding a floor to his house. It became his habit, long before retirement, to review the list periodically and make amendments and corrections. When he grew tired of scanning files in the office he would pull the precious list out of the left-hand drawer and get engrossed in examining it. He told himself he was looking forward to the end of his slavery so that he could be his own master and do what he really wanted to do. As soon as this thought came to him he would pull another sheet of paper out of the same drawer, which contained details of the pension and other pecuniary benefits he would get on retirement. The second list depressed him as much as the first cheered him up. He would place the two side by side and enter into a contrastive analysis that occupied him for hours. Once, in an inspired moment, he had added "politics" to the list of future activities as well as accruals to his income. But a few days later, when he was thinking about politics, he was reminded of the present generation of youth leaders, their

conduct and habits; then, pulling both lists out of the drawer, he put a question-mark against the entry "politics".

Although his plans had been made years before his retirement was due, a new concern entered his thoughts as the day drew nearer, which was: how could he prolong his service by a few more years? Thereafter, he forgot his post-retirement plans and focussed all his energies in devising means by which an extension could be obtained. Towards this end he employed many a stratagem: for instance, obtaining doctors' certificates, making false affidavits about his age, placating senior officials, dropping hints that the work he was doing would come to a halt if he was not around, etc. To the last day, he nurtured hopes that some divine intercession would result in his getting an extension of at least five years. But no such miracle occurred. On the day he attained the age of fifty-eight, his services were abruptly dispensed with.

He left the office with a heavy heart and told his friends he would not participate in any farewell ceremony. Carrying his personal papers with him he went home and sat brooding all evening, talking to no one. He was filled with loathing for the whole world and he mentally abused the people who had done nothing to help him obtain an extension. He reviewed the state of his own finances. It was always a mystery to him how his colleagues, whose salaries had been no higher than his, lived so well and appeared so cheerful after retirement. He sat alone that evening, trying to find an answer to the question; but it eluded him.

As a matter of fact, Basudev had managed his life quite well. His children were married and settled and he had adequate means to support his wife and himself. Even then, he felt inferior in comparison to the others. He blamed his own honesty for his plight; if he had been unscrupulous like them maybe he could have been much happier. Going back further still, he thought had he taken up medicine instead of economics

he could have grown rich; furthermore, he could have begun private practice after retirement and kept himself profitably occupied. He felt it was his father, long dead now, who was responsible for him making some wrong choices, for it was he who had made him study economics. He decided at last that it was really his fate that was to blame: he had been born into a lower middle-class family, had gone to an obscure village school and had been forced into taking up a humble occupation as soon as his education was complete. Just then he heard his wife moving about in the kitchen. What would life have been like he thought quite absurdly, if he had married someone else thirty-six years ago; he even thought of a few specific names!

He was unable to sleep that night. If he had not shared his bedroom with his wife he would have kept the light on and spent the night poring over old papers and making plans. He glanced at his watch repeatedly, but time seemed to be crawling; morning was hours away and his mind seethed with a welter of emotions — anger, disappointment and pride. He tried to overcome the discomfort born of sleeplessness by telling himself he was free at last and could do whatever he wished. He would implement all the plans he had made earlier. He never knew when sleep came through the crowd of agitated thoughts.

He woke up late next morning. He was about to rebuke his wife for not waking him up on time when he remembered he did not have to go to the office any more. His wife was busy praying to her gods. He went into the bathroom without disturbing her. Looking out of the window as he rinsed his face, he could see only familiar scenes. He had expected the whole world to reflect the change that had entered his life, but there was no such transformation. This morning was as unexciting as the rest of his days. Slightly dejected, he completed his ablutions and suddenly discovered, at nine

o' clock, that he had put on his office-going clothes and was standing with his briefcase in his hand.

Becoming conscious of this error, born of habit, he thought he would change out of his office clothes and turn his mind to something else. But as this would expose him to his wife's banter, he told her there was some unfinished work in the office and stepped out of the house. Though he had vowed that the villains who had denied him extension would never see his face again he found his feet dragging him towards the same old office. But on reaching the gates he rebuked himself and started to walk away, head lowered lest anyone should see him.

When he saw the post office a short distance ahead, a new thought came to him. He decided that as he had plenty of time on his hands now he would correspond regularly with all his friends and relations. He counted the cash in his pocket and calculated he could buy thirty envelopes. Buying envelopes at a post office counter was a new experience; all these years, it was his office peon who had performed this function. A routine which he had always thought to be simple proved to be complex and difficult. When he walked up to the counter the people ahead asked him to stand in the queue; then he found, after a lengthy wait, that he had been in the wrong queue. Eventually, however, when he had found the right queue, reached the counter, obtained his envelopes, paid, got a replacement for a torn two-rupee note, collected the unwanted stamps he had been obliged to buy because the clerk at the counter had no change, he realised, as he emerged from the crowd clutching his prize, that buying postage would consume quite a bit of the surplus time he had.

He was as much a stranger to transactions at the bank counter as he had been to the post office. So he decided that he would acquaint himself, on the very first day of his retirement, with the various institutions he would regularly

be concerned with hereafter, such as the post office, bank and municipal office. He would, therefore, make a trial withdrawal from the bank, though he had no immediate need. He took his chequebook out of the briefcase, noted the address of the bank and walked down to it. The procedures here were even more complicated. The first problem was that he had no pen to write with. The first person he approached told him flatly that he did not have a pen either, though Basudev could see one sticking out of his pocket. The second gentlemen stated that his pen was dry. Finally, Basudev turned to an elderly gentleman for help, who parted with his pen after advising him sternly, "Always bring your own pen when you come to the bank."

The next problem, after he had found a pen, was to locate a flat surface on which he could place his chequebook in order to fill in the cheque. He saw a table in the distance, but if he walked so far he would be out of the old man's sight, which he might not like. Finding no option, Basudev squatted on the floor, placed the chequebook on top of his briefcase and started to write when the old man said, "I've got to go now." Basudev filled in the cheque hurriedly and returned the pen to its owner with an inaudible "Bloody old fool!" He made up a mental list of the preparations he would have to make before he came to the bank again. If he couldn't manage a portable desk he would certainly have to come equipped with a pen in working condition. He told himself he should have acquired this experience at the bank much earlier.

It took him two hours to encash the cheque as he had to inquire from various people about the appropriate counters for presenting the cheque and receiving the payment. He also had to wait for quite some time while the person behind the counter finished the tea he was drinking. He realised for the first time how the people who were made to wait outside his office while he finished *his* tea might have felt. He realised too

that he had quite unfairly scolded his peon for tardiness when he had taken hours to cash a cheque for Basudev. When he had finally collected his cash and was walking out someone asked him for a pen and although Basudev was extremely polite in explaining his inability to help, it was obvious that the man did not believe him as he muttered, "Bloody old fool!"

And so the day passed in a variety of depressing and awkward experiences and Basudev returned home. He had imagined earlier that he could have a peaceful siesta every afternoon once he retired. But as he lay in bed he was unable to sleep, though he was physically exhausted. He got up and went to the adjoining room to examine the personal papers he had brought home from the office. He wanted to throw away all the unnecessary papers and start life afresh. Among the papers was his first letter of appointment; there were copies of leave applications, notifications of increments in his salary, etc. They were quite unnecessary now, and yet he couldn't force himself to tear them up. He read through each sheet of paper minutely, rejoicing over each promotion, growing depressed at each letter of admonition. It took him several hours to go through the papers. He told himself that he had done enough for the day; on some other occasion he would get rid of the unwanted papers.

Now he extracted the piece of paper on which he had composed his post-retirement plans and sat down at his desk. The list included the item "research". Basudev had been a research scholar for a brief period between passing his M.A. examination and taking up a job and it had been his intention to complete some day the project he had been working on. Being reminded of the project now, he started to look for his old notes and research papers and, to his great good fortune, found them. He had not hoped to find them again so easily and it appeared to him that some divine blessings were with him,

which would surely help him to complete the project. But when he started to read through his own notes he was disheartened; much of what he had written was incomprehensible to him now, even after repeated reading. He felt that the project he had begun was beyond his intelligence and ability now. He tore up the papers and crossed out "research" from the list.

The second day of retirement was even greater torture than the first; the days seemed unending. He had no inclination now to go through the old papers from the office. He focussed on the item "social service". The phrase sounded so impressive and appealing, but Basudev had no idea of how he was to go about it. He was reminded of Gopabandhu Das, the eminent social worker; but there was not the slightest prospect of a flood hitting the town he was living in. Neither had he any memory of a famine, epidemic or communal riot occurring there. The idea of distributing free drinking water during the hot summer seemed much too trifling, while the idea of setting up a school for orphan children appeared quite unworkable. He no longer believed it would be possible for him to dedicate his retired life to social service.

Frustrated in all his noble plans, Basudev decided he would concentrate on the personal chores he had been unable to attend to earlier, owing to the pressures of official work – such things as paying municipal taxes, visiting the optician for a new pair of glasses, writing to the insurance company, getting his suitcase repaired, etc. He thought these tasks would keep him occupied for the rest of his life, but to his great surprise everything was smoothly done in just three days. The pain of having nothing to do started again the next day. As he had been busy in the office for all these years, his wife had taken refuge in a variety of religious rituals to pass her time. Now when he sought her company in his spare time it was not available, as she had built up a routine of household and religious duties in which he found no place.

Fortunately, while Basudev was in such a frame of mind, he was reminded of Chandramani, a former colleague in the office who had retired a year earlier. He was one of those to whom life is one long entertainment, to be spent in laughter and merriment. No one had ever seen him worried about his job or himself; he always looked cheerful and relaxed. One reason could have been that he was single, although no one was certain of his marital history. He had numerous vices. A chain-smoker and relentless consumer of paan, he was fond of hard liquor, and it was rumoured that he had other weaknesses as well. But all said and done, he was happy; he was on good terms with everyone, had no cares, did what he pleased and above all, was not worried about retirement.

Basudev was Chandramani Babu's antithesis. Although he had no responsibilities either, he remained morose, as though the entire burden of the office rested on his shoulders. He had no bad habits: let alone paan and cigarettes, he avoided non-vegetarian food. He had always kept his distance from alcohol and allied indulgences; in fact, he had even kept his distance from Chandramani Babu.

Today, however, as he sat alone, dejected, he felt that while he had got nothing from life, Chandramani Babu had grabbed all that life had to offer with both hands. He himself had looked at the cup of life and held back, reined in by considerations of morality, decency and public opinion, whereas Chandramani Babu had drunk deeply, unhindered by such constraints. Earlier, he had considered Chandramani Babu to be thoughtless and irresponsible, even anti-social; but now he realised Chandramani Babu was a complete man — a successful example of one who lived life whole. He began an analysis of Chandramani Babu's faults and strengths. Whatever his personal shortcomings, he had never harmed anyone, had done his work at the office efficiently and had been a good colleague to everyone. Basudev felt he had done the man

injustice by harbouring uncharitable views about his character. He decided he would go and meet Chandramani Babu.

What would his life have been like, Basudev thought, if he had followed Chandramani Babu's example? For instance, what if he had been a flesh-eater? Many of the world's spiritual leaders were non-vegetarians. He had failed to convert even his own children to vegetarianism! He knew many good and moral people who ate meat. He remembered occasions when he had taken meat in ignorance. Although he had abstained when the error was pointed out to him, he had not found the food distasteful. He suddenly felt a strong urge to eat meat. Visions of numerous delicacies prepared from meat floated up before him. Although he was not hungry, he had an immediate desire to get up and taste the forbidden food. Telling his wife, who was busy with her puja, that he had some things to attend to, he stepped out of the house. He had never realised before what strong impulses a slight craving for flesh could lead to. But once he had walked into a restaurant that afternoon he felt weak and fearful. He was going to break old traditions. What for? Only to indulge his tastebuds? To bring a moment's excitement into his dry life? Or was this a symbolic revolt against the blind discipline that had kept him chained for all these years? Or was it mere effrontery? As he went through the menu he experienced many such conflicts. Would his body cooperate with his mind? Why hadn't he been able to take this decision earlier? Finally, his scruples won and he ordered an omelette instead of a meat dish.

The omelette was delicious and must have been nutritious as well, but Basudev felt a tinge of remorse as he walked home. And along with the remorse came a longing to return to the restaurant and devour a variety of meat dishes. Basudev often thought of telling his wife of the desires that were troubling him, but managed to calm them down. For two days he had guilty feelings about the omelette; on the third, he went to the

same restaurant and ordered a mutton cutlet. His false teeth were not particularly helpful in allowing him to chew and munch his food and the following day he felt he had an upset stomach, caused undoubtedly by the cutlet. But his resolve did not waver; now and again he patronised the restaurant and got acquainted with a range of meat dishes.

All this turned into an adventure; keeping things secret from his wife, suffering periodic stomach disorders, not eating at home and making false excuses became a part of his daily existence. But it was not as if he wasn't enjoying it; in fact, he now felt a craving for alcohol. However, this wasn't going to be as simple as walking into a restaurant and ordering a cutlet. Basudev decided to seek Chandramani Babu's help.

He had imagined he would find Chandramani Babu, at this time of the evening, in his bedroom, in the company of some unknown woman. He had even drawn up an estimate of the woman's age and visualised her features. But when he called on Chandramani Babu he found him sipping tea on the verandah, dressed in an old lungi and vest. He seemed happy at seeing Basudev. Keeping his intentions concealed, Basudev said, "I was passing by and thought I'd look you up and see how you are." Chandramani Babu asked him about the office. When Basudev agreed to have a cup of tea Chandramani Babu got up to make another cup, as there was no one else in the house. Basudev felt this was an ideal arrangement for Chandramani Babu's personal routine; although Chandramani Babu was older, he looked younger than Basudev. Despite all his irregularities and excesses he was fit and energetic. And above all, he looked as cheerful as ever.

Fetching the cup of tea Chandramani Babu said, "Come, let's go inside." His sitting room was tastefully furnished and Basudev tickled himself by imagining a pretty young lady on the sofa in one corner. I'm too early, he told himself; if I had come later I'd have got something better than a cup of tea

and probably caught a glimpse of the goddess as well. However, it was an evening well spent, despite all these deficiencies, as Chandramani Babu was extremely hospitable and affectionate.

The craving for alcohol remained as strong as the lust for meat had been earlier. He had no idea what liquor tasted like and imagined it to be a delicious, romantic drink. He had driven away from his mind, all thoughts of the damage that it could cause. Two days later the craving drove him again to Chandramani Babu's door. Although the time was more appropriate, somehow Basudev did not feel inclined to make up false excuses and trouble Chandramani Babu. He realised it was just as difficult to start a new friendship at his age as it was to indulge in a passion for meat or alcohol. But could he have started a friendship with Chandramani Babu earlier?

The powerful craving took him next to a liquor shop. He was too timid to walk into a dimly-lit bar, amid the crowd of boozers, and order a drink and so he decided he would buy a bottle, carry it home and take a tipple when the coast was clear. The price list hanging in front of the liquor shop did not make much sense to him. There was a crowd inside. Basudev thought he would wait until the crowd thinned out, then consult the shopkeeper before he made his purchase. He walked to the pavement bookstall where illustrated magazines were displayed and waited. He was turning over the pages of a magazine to pass the time when he came across a brightly-coloured glossy magazine, its cover page securely stapled. He picked it up; the nude picture on the cover informed him this was a pornographic magazine. He tried to peer inside, as far as the staple would permit, but was unable to see anything distinctly.

The stallkeeper walked up to him and said, "I've got something even better; want it?" Basudev looked around, but saw no known faces. "Okay," he said, "let's have a look." The

stallkeeper opened the lid of the box he had been sitting on, took out a book wrapped in a newspaper and handed it over to Basudev, whispering, "Don't open it here. Ten rupees!" Basudev's mind was filled with curiosity, excitement and fear as he held the book in his hand. For a moment he thought he would bargain; but just then a few others came to browse through the magazines. He hurriedly put the book inside his bag and held out a ten-rupee note to the stallkeeper.

When he walked across to the liquor-shop, he had decided on what to buy. He asked for a small bottle of gin and put that inside his bag too. Then, to conceal things from his wife, he went to a pharmacy and bought a few medicines which he did not require. He went home and put the medicines, the gin and the book in their proper places. Now his sole objective was to drink the gin and leaf through the book as early as possible. He had heard of "gin-and-lime", and that was why he had selected gin out of so many drinks. Now he squeezed a couple of limes into a tumbler, pretending he had a stomach upset. His wife was still busy with her puja and he took advantage of the fact to pour out a measure of gin into the tumbler, which he gulped down. Finding the taste quite unremarkable he poured out a larger amount and gulped it down in one gulp.

Body and mind growing lighter, head reeling and an urge to throw up — was this all there was to the joys of drinking? Or had he gone wrong in measuring out the proportions? He felt dizzy and lay down on the cot. He had an overpowering desire to read the book he had bought; but the awareness of his wife's presence made his courage evaporate. Nevertheless, he began to speculate on the contents of the book while his head throbbed, and thus he fell asleep.

When he awoke it was evening; his wife had gone out to the temple. His head felt heavy, but he went straight to the place where he had hidden the book and pulled it out. Making

sure that the door was bolted he switched on the table lamp, wiped the lenses of his spectacles clean, put them on and opened the book. He read the book through in a single sitting. It was utterly obscene and titillating. A storm of passion raged through his aching head, but Basudev noted with regret that it produced no physical response in him.

He put the book away, switched off the lamp and sat alone in the dark, suddenly made aware of his senility. Suddenly he was reminded of his false teeth, painful back, the thick lenses of his spectacles, and the man in the bank who had called him a bloody old fool. The idea of visiting a brothel with Chandramani Babu, which he had been nursing carefully, left him. On the contrary, he decided, he would regularly accompany his wife to the temple, starting tomorrow.

Siblings

When the car halted on the muddy village road for the second time, Subodh was disheartened. As his earlier visits to the village had been during the winter he had never seen the road in this pitiable condition. Although the slush, the straggling bushes and the crawling insects reminded him of his childhood, he felt annoyed as he got out of the taxi and wiped the mud off his shoes on a patch of grass. He should have put off this visit, he told himself. But when he heard of his father's grave condition he was unable to restrain himself. Besides, he had some business to attend to in Delhi. He wanted to negotiate matters to postpone a seminar to be held in India, to the winter months so that he could return once again, with his family.

Subodh had been living in the United States for fourteen years. At first he had missed his parents and brothers and the warmth of home. He planned to return to India after he had made his pile of money. But, of course, there is no limit to material wants. He moved from one university to another in search of a higher salary and then took up a company job. As he had bought a large house on a hire-purchase plan he had to keep looking for a more lucrative job so that he could pay the instalments. Even his wife started working, despite her

meagre education; after their two sons had grown up she enrolled for a training course and found an attractive job in a hospital. Their sons were not merely American by birth; their appearance, speech, conduct and thinking were those of a typical American teenager. Now Subodh had given up thoughts of returning to India during his working life. But after he retired and his children settled down, perhaps ...

Although this was neither the time nor the place to review the joys and sorrows, the profits and losses, of his life, Subodh found his thoughts returning to the past as he stood by the roadside, sheltering himself under an umbrella from the rain. He had left his poverty and deprived childhood far behind. His children went to a good school and he was able to meet all their demands easily. He was content with his career. On holidays the family went out together. The only regret was that they lacked social contacts. He would occasionally invite his own colleagues and those of his wife home for a week-end dinner, but soon realised that this ritual, like all the other means he adopted to survive in America, lacked spontaneity or sincerity. When, after the guests had left, he would help his wife to wash-up, a feeling of depression would overcome him. At such times his thoughts would turn back to his own country and faces from his childhood and youth, which he had known either slightly or intimately, would float up. His wife, reading his thoughts in his eyes, would ask, "When is your next seminar in Delhi planned?"

Such seminars in Delhi were a convenient tie with the motherland, as it enabled him to return for a few days at no expense to himself, without the bother of having to apply for leave. Sometimes he was accompanied by his wife and children. But this time he had had to pay for his own ticket; nor had it been easy to get leave from the office. It was in this dejected frame of mind, brought on by financial sacrifice, that Subodh asked the driver of the taxi, "How much longer will it take

to fix the car?" Lowering the bonnet of the car, the driver replied, "Some water has got into the ignition. It'll take a while to dry out. Why don't you sit inside the car?" The driver lit up a cigarette in the drizzling rain and Subodh, folding up his umbrella, climbed back into the car. He was exhausted after the long flight and as he sat thinking, with eyes shut, of his wife and two children, he dozed off.

Meanwhile, in the village, his elder brothers Manobodh and Prabodh, who had been sitting up on the verandah waiting for his arrival, were almost giving up hope of his coming. Although they had sent him a telegram a week earlier, how could they be sure that it would have reached him? Besides, how would they know that Subodh would want to travel so far at his own expense, putting all his engagements aside? Even then, they were hopeful. Although he did not write to them regularly, he generally came home each time he visited Delhi. He would drive up suddenly in a taxi, with no prior intimation, spend a day in the village and drive off the next day. But he hadn't been able to come when their mother died. She passed away while they were still debating whether or not he should be informed of her condition, and it was the news of her death that their telegram had carried. He had not written back then but a cheque for two hundred and fifty dollars arrived at Manobodh's address, which took them a long time to encash.

This time, therefore, Manobodh had sent for Prabodh as soon as their father's condition worsened and together they despatched a telegram. The eldest son, Manobodh, looked after the family's lands in the village while Prabodh taught in a college in a neighbouring town. Their father was very old and fell ill repeatedly. Even Manobodh was not young any more and had persistent bouts of fever. Each brother had his own domestic worries and they made it a point to get together when someone was ill, when there was some problem on the

land and at harvest time. Earlier, when the old man had gone off periodically to spend some time with Prabodh, the two families had kept in touch, but now that he was ailing he did not leave the village and contact between the brothers had lessened.

The doctor from the village dispensary was treating their father. Although he kept assuring them that everything was all right the brothers knew that this time no one could be certain what would happen. They knew too that if Subodh arrived he would want to know why they hadn't called in a senior doctor from the city. It was this topic they were discussing now.

"I could have brought a doctor with me when I came," Prabodh said, "but you know how fussy these city doctors are. Fees to be paid in advance, and nothing but a taxi is good enough for them. If it had been after the first day of the month I would certainly have spared no expense, but I got your message on the twenty-fifth."

"Well, what was I to do? I was all alone," Manobodh said, as though exculpating himself. "I haven't found time to go to the fields for the last fifteen days. And you know the land needs personal attention, or one gets nothing from it."

Prabodh caught the hint behind that remark. He had been coming home only at harvest time, to claim his share. There were times when he thought he would give up his share of the land to his elder brother, since he wasn't helping in the management at all. But his economic condition ruled out any such generosity. "Brother," he said, "these days it's difficult even to buy a handful of grain. How much do I earn from my job anyway? It's all gone by the twentieth of the month."

Just then they heard a sound from within and Manobodh got up to see what the matter was. "Father was asking for some water," he reported when he returned. The old man lay on his bed inside the house, surrounded by the women and children.

He was too weak to get up or even speak. He lay quiet, only giving vent to his agony when he found breathing difficult.

"I came at once when I got your message," Prabodh said, "but my thoughts are with Kuna, my youngest son. He just refuses to study, you know; managed to pass somehow with a third division. Now his admission in college will be a problem. If I had been there, I could have spoken to someone. But unfortunately I've been cooped up here for five days now."

Manobodh's children had given up their studies and were helping him look after the land. His eldest son had got married the year before. As Manobodh was totally dependent on the land, all he could think of was the crops. "Well, I haven't been able to go out to the fields for quite some time now," he said.

"Why don't you go now?" Prabodh said. "I'm here, so there's no need for you to stay at home now."

"We'll decide what to do when Subodh arrives," Manobodoh said. "Do you want some tea?"

"Yes," Prabodh said. "Ask them not to put too much sugar in it." Then, suddenly remembering something, he said, "What about getting a packet of good tea? Why don't you send someone to the market before Subodh arrives?"

They were sipping tea on the verandah when Subodh's taxi drove up. The village children appeared as though by magic and surrounded the taxi. Subodh paid off the driver, handed over his suitcase to someone to carry, glanced at the faces of his brothers and gathered that their father was still alive; then, slightly reassured, he asked, "How's Father?"

The three brothers went in together. There was no one inside the house; they had all come out to see Subodh. The old man was sleeping, his breathing extremely slow and irregular. After a brief glance at his pale and sickly face Subodh turned to his brothers, and they walked out onto the verandah. Before Subodh could say anything, Prabodh said, "We had decided to get a doctor from the city but the local

doctor said there was no cause for alarm." Manobodh asked someone to fetch the doctor so that he could explain their father's condition to Subodh. Looking at Subodh he said, "He was really in bad shape when we sent you that telegram."

"I had to put off some very important work in order to come here," Subodh said. "And moreover, travelling is really expensive nowadays."

They had emptied a small room for Subodh's use and tidied it up. He went in, changed, and rejoined his brothers on the verandah. He suddenly remembered that Manobodh had written asking him to bring some small gifts for his children; but in his hurry he hadn't been able to buy gifts for anyone.

It was getting dark and someone placed a lantern, which gave out a feeble glimmer, on the verandah. The house had been wired up but there was still no supply of power to the village, although everyone said it was imminent. Some people from the village came to meet them. Subodh was the only "foreigner" in the village. Although he had known many of them quite well it was difficult now to revive old relationships and so the exchange with once familiar people was limited to namashkars. Manobodh was proud of his younger brother who had gone off to live in America and thereby given him a certain status. Although Subodh did not write to him regularly he derived immense satisfaction from the reporting of imaginary letters, to which the villagers were treated by him. Whenever Subodh came home Manobodh questioned him closely about life in America and thus acquired detailed knowledge, hoping that it would be of use someday. He believed in giving the people of the village startling news, whether or not they understood him: for instance, the transformation that the names of Subodh's two sons underwent in America, Janmejaya changing to John and Jajati to George.

After the visiting neighbours had left, Manobodh asked Subodh, referring to their father's illness, "What do you people

do when you fall ill in America?" Prabodh had one great weakness; his tendency to exhibit his bookish knowledge on every conceivable subject. Before Subodh could reply he said, "Illness is the same everywhere. The only difference is that in America the ailments have big names; the doctors are big, the hospitals are big, and the medicines come with big price tags because they are not adulterated. What else, Subodh?" Subodh smiled faintly and said, "No, it's not that. In America one has to have health insurance."

Just then the village doctor arrived and got off his bicycle. He too was curious to know about doctors in America and Subodh had to provide a comprehensive treatise on the subject. When the talk veered off the topic of health insurance to a description of filmstars who had insured their legs for millions of dollars, Manobodh seemed to grow impatient. "Come, doctor," he said. "Let's have a look at the patient."

The brothers escorted the doctor to their father's room. He had gone into deep sleep. His breathing was regular, though it was evident that he was in pain. The doctor used his stethoscope to examine the patient's chest, reviewed the prescription he had written earlier, picked up the bottle of medicine to see how much had been consumed and said, "Everything's all right."

The doctor gave Subodh a complete history of his father's ailment and the treatment he had prescribed. But when he started to ask Subodh more questions about doctors and hospitals in America, Manobodh grew impatient and said, "Are you hungry, Subodh?" Subodh yawned and said, "No, but I'm sleepy." Asking the doctor to come again next morning, Manobodh took leave of everyone. Then the brothers sat down to eat. After dinner they chatted again and Subodh never knew when he fell asleep.

Next morning, when Subodh woke up to retrieve the blanket which had slipped off his body, he realised he was

back in the village and that the day was far advanced. He remembered his family he had left behind in America. After all these years he still felt like an outsider there and the idea of leaving his children unprotected made him uneasy. Dismissing the thought he got up hurriedly and went into the room where his father lay. He was awake. He recognised Subodh and seemed happy to see him. When Subodh came still closer he tried to say something, though no words came. Subodh came out of the room, washed his face and hands and went back to his bedroom. He took some foreign coins out of his coat pocket, intending to give them away to the children. He rearranged his belongings and drank the cup of tea which someone had left in the room. Then he stepped out onto the verandah.

His brothers were waiting for him. As soon as he sat down Manobodh began to talk about their lands and the problems arising therefrom. "Brother, why talk to me about these things?" Subodh said. "What can I understand of them? I come back to the village occasionally only because Father is alive." After a pause he said, "If there are any papers you want me to sign concerning the land, I'll sign them before I leave." Manobodh said, "Let Father recover first; we can talk of other things later."

After a great deal of hesitation Prabodh revealed the thought that he had been harbouring. "There are no prospects for a lecturer these days," he said, "unless one has a higher degree. Lots of people are going to America for higher studies. Do you think I could get some such opportunity?" He would have been happy if Subodh had given him even a faintly encouraging reply. But Subodh said bluntly, "Those days are gone! When I went to America it was easy to get a seat in the university as well as a fellowship. But they're very strict now; one has to finance oneself for at least a year." Seeing the disappointment on Prabodh's face Subodh said, "Well, send in your application first; I'll see if anything can be done." Prabodh kept quiet, for

he knew that Subodh had spoken merely to comfort him; there was no sincerity behind his words.

The doctor arrived just then and they went in together. The doctor examined the patient and said, "He's much better today. He should recover soon." And in fact their father looked much brighter. Subodh's brothers felt slightly guilty because they had summoned him for no good reason from such a distance. To prove the genuineness of their concern they said to the doctor, "But you told us a few days ago that his condition was serious. Or else we wouldn't have ..." The doctor said, "His condition was really critical when I first saw him. But I was able to diagnose the illness correctly and treat him on the right lines." He read his own prescription again, crossed out one of the medicines he had prescribed and wrote in another. "I'll change one of the medicines today as he's much better," he said. "He should be completely cured in a few days."

They returned to the verandah and the doctor sat down with them instead of leaving. Like the other villagers, he found in Subodh a link to the outside world. He wanted to learn more about America from Subodh, particularly about the opportunities available to doctors. He had heard that doctors from India earned millions in America and lived like kings. Although Subodh could sense how anxious the doctor and the others were to hear about America he kept silent, for his thoughts were entirely of his two children in America. He asked, even though he knew it was impossible, "Can I make a call to America from the local post office?"

On getting a negative reply he began to think of the seminar in Delhi. If he could only find a typewriter he would be able, at the very least, to send a letter to Delhi before his departure. But there was no hope of that. So he decided to send a handwritten letter to his friend who was organising the seminar. "I'll be back in a moment," he said rising, and the doctor walked towards his bicycle, disappointed.

Manobodh raised the topic of the land once more. Prabodh was interested in the land only to the extent that it provided rice for his family; he would have preferred to sell his share of the land and use the money to construct a house in the town where he lived. But all that Manobodh could talk about was the land and the farming and Prabodh found the topic of no interest at all.

Just then the old village schoolmaster appeared on the road outside and called Manobodh. Though far advanced in age he was still mobile and had managed to preserve his sense of humour. Everyone in the village, young or old, had been his pupil at one time or another and he was the "Old Master" to everyone. He had heard of Subodh's coming and that was why he was there. Asking him to sit down, Manobodh went in and called Subodh. The old master looked at each one of the brothers and said, "The three of you looked alike when you were children; you even had the same walk. Each one of you has received a beating from me. Now you are all grown up — all busy with your own affairs." After a while the old man said, "All three of you were about to drown once in the village pond. It was Nakula who pulled you out."

Subodh was reminded of his childhood. He could not remember the incident in the pond, but he did remember that they had played, romped and studied together. His mind was suddenly filled with affection for his brothers. He looked at them. There were no family resemblances now. Their faces had changed with age and differing lifestyles. No one would guess they were brothers. They were united only by a few faint memories of childhood. But who had time for those memories?

The old master asked Subodh, "Are there any old teachers like me in America?" Subodh stared foolishly at him. Grey-haired, wrinkled, eyes that were losing their vision: Who could he find in America to compare with this old man who had been a teacher to the entire village? He thought he would tell the

old man something about the system of education in America; but he changed his mind and only said, "Things are different there. Their children, their education, their teachers ..." Everything is different there, he thought, not just education.

When the old master had left, others came to meet them. When he had seen them off and finished his meal he went back to his father's room and found him looking greatly improved, though the medicines had made him drowsy. He opened his eyes, saw Subodh and asked him when he had arrived and how he was. When he dozed off again Subodh went back to his own room, picked up the letter he had written to his friend in Delhi and gave it to someone to post.

Prabodh said, "Father is improving, so I think I'll take the bus home this evening. I'm worried about Kuna's admission." "I was thinking of going back too," Subodh said, "but I've booked my seat on a flight two days later. Seeing how things are here, I don't think I could manage an earlier flight; so I'll have to stay on here for another two days." Looking at Prabodh, he said again, "Why don't you stay for two more days? I'll drop you off at your home on my way back, and I could meet the other members of your family as well." Manobodh was happy to hear of this arrangement. If Prabodh stayed at home, he could take Subodh to the fields and show him what was happening there.

The brothers sat silently on the verandah. Their father was convalescing, and the slender bond which had brought them together was dissolving. Subodh was thinking of his family in America. What were the children doing now? Prabodh was thinking of Kuna and the strain on his finances which this trip to the village had imposed. How was he to make up the deficit? He had been obliged to apply for leave, and this made him uneasy, for who knew what would happen in a privately-run college? Manobodh thought he must go back to the fields soon; the hired labourers were not to be trusted.

In some distant past the three brothers had been alike, had gone to the same school, had been in danger of drowning together in the same pond. No one could remember those events now. Today there was nothing that they could even talk about together. They were separate individuals who had come together briefly and would spend the next two days in worthless talk.

When it grew dark and their continuing silence became oppressive Manobodh said, "When Father is a little better we'll have a photograph taken with him." The two other brothers laughed to show how eager they were to accept his proposal, as though the piece of paper on which the photograph was printed would bind together all their lost memories and bring them together once again.

The Ashram

In other parts of the world people pay bribes when they want something done which is outside the rules but in our country bribes have to be paid even for legitimate routine jobs. This was the hard truth that Jayaram was made to realise after he had already spent a great deal of labour, time and money. The groundwork had been done for the new factory he was setting up; only the power supply remained to be installed. The land had been acquired, the bank loan for the purchase of machinery negotiated, the civil works completed, all this without a hitch; but the problem arose when the power supply had to be sanctioned. He was prepared to pay to get the work done, but the problem was that there were no fixed rules for the bribes to be paid — to whom, at what levels and in what amounts. It was difficult to identify the officials at different levels who were open to bribes, to establish contact with them through brokers and to determine the amounts to be paid. Sometimes the official concerned would go on leave, or the middleman would run off with the money. Or else the official would step up his demands after the deal had been negotiated, pleading increased expenditure over the treatment of an ailing wife. The file pertaining to the power supply moved in rhythm with

the bribes paid, like a creaking cartwheel to which oil is fed in driblets.

The factory sheds had been erected and the machinery installed. The engineer, who drew a fat salary, had even conducted a trial run of the plant, with power pilfered from an adjoining factory. He told Jayaram, "The machines are excellent. You can get 120 percent output if you run three shifts." Jayaram was reassured when he heard this and sent for the broker. "Get the file moving immediately," he instructed the broker. "And never mind the cost."

A year and a half passed thus but the file, maintaining its tortoise pace, refused to budge. One morning the broker came to Jayaram looking dejected and said, "The file was sent to the minister yesterday." He explained that though the chief engineer could have taken the decision at his own level he had sent the file up, to escape any allegation of corruption. This was bad news indeed. The power minister's office was a mortuary for lost files; once a file went there, it could be rescued only at great expense and effort. Jayaram's engineer, in the mean time, had rated the efficiency of the new machines at 130 percent; the loss of the file, at a time like this, was heart-rending for Jayaram. On hearing the fatal news from the broker he sat for a while with his head buried in his hands, then said, "Very well, get the file out of the minister's office. I am prepared for the costs."

But evil days have their end. After due devotion and doctoring the file returned from exile, bearing favourable orders. Jayaram's joy was boundless. He did pray, however, that his gods would spare him the torture of further encounters with officialdom. The power lines were rigged up legally now and the engineer's reports grew even more optimistic. The first smile appeared on Jayaram's face after a period of two years. He spoke normally once again to his wife and young children. The almanacs were consulted, an auspicious moment decided for the inauguration of the factory and a priest engaged.

But happy days too are often ephemeral. Just a day before his factory was to start production, the state suffered a power-cut. Inadequate rain had led to a drying up of reservoirs and a fall in the generation of power. Jayaram's file had reached the office of the rain-god Indra himself. He might have tried to bribe his way out of the situation if he could find a suitable broker and strike a deal. But this possibility was reduced to a fantasy. He was plunged deep in despair. Years of labour, all his savings, had gone waste. The engineer deserted him and joined another company. The broker did not refund the money he was supposed to refund. The bank sent him a reminder for the repayment of the loan; there was a lawyer's notice from the company which had supplied the machinery for his plant, for which he had paid only in part. With the decline in his fortunes his wife's behaviour changed. He began to neglect his children, bowed under the weight of his sorrows. Then one day, while in this frame of mind, he decided he would retreat to the ashram of Baisakhi Baba.

Baisakhi Baba's fame had spread far, though he was not as well-known as the other globe-trotting god-men of the time. He had a huge, sprawling ashram, amid sylvan surroundings, beside a flowing stream, far from the city. He had innumerable foreign disciples and the ashram was always crowded with adoring visitors from distant places. Several of Jayaram's acquaintances were among the Baba's admirers and never stopped singing his praises. Not that he lacked detractors. Lurid stories appeared in the press from time to time about the ashram — about the Baba's alleged CIA connections, the suicides that had taken place in the ashram, the disappearance of a female overseas visitor, etc.; but the Baba's devotees remained loyal despite the scandals and their numbers increased steadily.

No one knew where the Baba had come from or how long he had lived there. There were doubts about his age and the

part of the country he belonged to. He spoke several languages, although now his discourses were given only in English, for the benefit of his foreign disciples. There were even conflicting views about the origin of his name. Some said it was derived from the torrid month of baisakh, during which he had been born, while others said "baisakhi", which is the Hindi word for crutch, referred to the prosthetic device which the Baba had used during his earlier days. Then, one day (it was said), his guru had ordered him to throw his crutches away and walk erect before the world. But the name had remained.

Since his childhood days Jayaram had been moderately religious; he visited temples occasionally but had never thought of adopting spiritual practices on a regular basis. But after entering the world of commerce he had developed an increasing faith in gods and goddesses and in religious rituals. As his risks and liabilities grew so did his dependence on the supernatural. Until the time that his factory was set up he had remained steadfast in his devotion to the whole system of planetary configurations, priests and ritual worship. On the day that the supply of power was threatened and his hopes of starting up the factory seemed about to expire, his religiosity took a dramatic plunge. Even then, he had the fear that if he abandoned his gods and goddesses at a time like this, he might be inviting their wrath. It was while he was in this dilemma that he remembered Baisakhi Baba.

He knew nothing about the rules of the Baba's ashram or the procedure he would have to go through in order to be initiated as a disciple. He could have consulted his friends, but in his misery he chose to distance himself from them. He decided to go to the ashram alone and put both his own destiny and the Baba's spiritual prowess on test. Earlier, whenever he had to travel, his office staff had made the bookings and his chauffeur had driven him to the station or airport. But he decided now to travel alone, by bus. He would spend a week

or so at the ashram and then decide his course of action. He packed a few clothes in a suitcase for the journey. When the suitcase had been stuffed full, something prompted him to toss everything out again. He took just a few essential things in a cloth bag which he slung from one shoulder, bought his bus-ticket and told his wife, "I am going away for a few days." She said nothing in reply — did not even ask where he was going.

The bus, which should have started at ten p.m., left only at midnight. Seated uncomfortably, Jayaram tried to take stock of his own life, his mind restless and dejected. But all he could register was the intense summer heat and discomfort. Once the bus started to move, however, he was fanned by a cool breeze and despite the jerks and jolts he was subjected to, he fell asleep. He woke up only when the bus came to a halt the next morning.

He got out, still half-asleep, and sat down on the steps of the river bank. The sun had not quite risen; there was partial darkness. The temple in the distance was dimly visible. People had not started moving about; everything was quiet and peaceful. The place, named after the presiding deity, was known as "Shesh Nath" — Lord of the Apocalypse — and it seemed as if everything came to an end here. Here, there was nothing — no home, family, bank, engineer, broker or minister. Even the rain-god Indra was absent. Nothing but the endless murmuring of the river and limitless peace.

When the last remnants of sleep were blown away, Jayaram went down to the river and washed his face and hands. He asked the man who sat beside him on the steps about the Baba's ashram and was disappointed to learn that it was on the far side of the river and that the Baba had nothing to do with the temple of Lord Shesh Nath, which stood on this bank. But the man assured him that he could find a boat to ferry him across. And, in fact, he saw a boat anchored a little distance away. Jayaram had planned to go to the temple first,

but seeing the boat he clambered aboard. There were others inside the boat, carrying cans of milk to the other side. Jayaram stretched out his hand and touched the water. The sun was bright already; soon it would begin to get hot.

On reaching the other bank, Jayaram offered some money to the boatman, which he declined. The milkmen informed him that the ashram was five miles away. He would have to walk up the rocky path. The milkmen were going there too. There was no other way of getting to the ashram except on foot. When Jayaram asked the milkmen how the foreigners reached the ashram he was told they flew there. Jayaram remembered reading about a helipad which had been constructed for the Baba's foreign disciples. But now he would have to struggle up that difficult, rocky path.

The prospect of a five-mile journey depressed him. It had been years since he had used his feet to carry him anywhere. The milkmen lifted their cans to their shoulders and Jayaram decided he would walk together with them. They stepped out briskly, carrying their loads, but Jayaram was breathless after he had walked just a few steps. He felt he would not be able to carry on; the five-mile walk was quite impossible. The milkmen, walking effortlessly, were far ahead of him now. After a while they disappeared round a bend in the path. Jayaram found himself alone and friendless. Then he realised that for the first time in years he was not worrying about his profits and losses; his only worry now was about completing that walk and reaching the Baba's ashram.

Perhaps he should have had a cup of tea, he told himself, before he crossed the river. But what if the boat had left while he was still drinking his tea; could he have found another? Besides, the day was getting warmer. The longer he delayed, the hotter he would have found the sun. How hot it was already, he thought: what would it be like next month? Would the ashram be just as hot? Maybe there were some trees

further ahead; the ashram would be cool if it was surrounded by trees. Lucky for him he had only a shoulder-bag and not his suitcase! How on earth would he have managed that suitcase? Did all the others who visited the ashram travel light? Maybe, one could probably hire a coolie somewhere. But he hadn't yet seen anyone who looked like a coolie. Perhaps this wasn't the right season and so there were few people travelling to the ashram; or perhaps the evening would bring more travellers. Shifting the bag from one shoulder to the other, Jayaram made up a list of the things he had brought. Should he have left a few things behind; or could he have brought a few more? Of course, this would depend on the length of his stay at the ashram. And that would depend on Baisakhi Baba. Who could tell how the Baba would receive him? If he liked the place he would stay on for some more time. What were the facilities at the ashram like? Well, since there were foreign visitors, the facilities were bound to be adequate, if not five-star. Would he be required to pay? He groped for the chequebook in his pocket.

As soon as his fingers touched the chequebook he remembered, for a moment, his bank and then his factory. But then his thoughts returned, quite effortlessly, to the present. His shoes were beginning to pinch. If he had known he would be required to walk he would have brought shoes of a different kind. Of course, he didn't have proper shoes for such rocky terrain, but he could have bought a new pair. At his age some exercise was necessary, but he had been neglecting it so far. He should have got into the habit of walking for at least an hour each morning. At the ashram he would make it a point to go for a walk in the morning. As a matter of fact, he had often thought of a morning walk, but then the phone would ring and the newspaper would arrive and he wouldn't be able to tear himself away. There was the morning news on the radio. Life was ruled by the clock.

He glanced at his watch. He had imagined he had walked for about an hour but his estimate was quite wrong. Only twenty minutes had passed since he had got off the boat. He had no way of knowing how much further he would have to walk. When he left home he had imagined that the ashram was just next to the temple of Shesh Nath. Who knew that it was on the other side of the river, and five miles away? Moreover, could these milkmen be trusted? Their five miles could easily be twenty-five! If only it had been five kilometres! If he had known the going would be so tough, he would have taken the helicopter, whatever the cost! But where did the helicopter take off from?

He suddenly felt a craving for a cigarette. He had been a heavy smoker only a few years earlier. The doctors told him he would have to stop or else he would develop cardiac problems. That frightened him out of the habit. How difficult it had been at first! Life without cigarettes hardly seemed worthwhile. But he grew used to it gradually: just as smoking had been a habit, so too not smoking became a habit. A friend of his had taken to chewing paan in order to kick the cigarette habit, but wasn't able to do so. He ended up with two addictions instead of one.

Even walking is a matter of habit. When he had started out, he felt, after walking just a short distance, that he wouldn't be able to do it. But now that he had come half way — well, who knew if it was half way or not — it didn't seem impossible any longer. His feet had grown accustomed to the uneven path. It was just a matter of time before he got there. In some other situation he might have regretted the time he had wasted in walking such a short distance but now time had lost its terror. At home, time had made its dominance felt — twelve months to the year, the number of days to the month, hours to the day, minutes to the hour, etc.; everything was neatly split up and marked out — the dates on which instalments

had to be deposited in the bank, meetings of the employees' union convened, his blood-pressure checked; a time to drink tea.

A cup of tea that morning wouldn't have been a bad idea, actually. Surely there was a tea-stall next to the Shesh Nath temple; however, it wouldn't be open at that early hour. The tea one gets at wayside stalls is awful; ask for good tea and they flood you with milk and sugar. Once when the factory was going up he had asked for tea at a wayside stall. After that, he made sure a flask of tea was ready each time he left home. He could throw off the tea-habit too, if he had to, just as he had quit smoking. At this moment he felt sure there were a lot of things he could give up — newspapers, the radio, non-vegetarian food, sex, the luxury of a spacious home, wife and family, friends, the entire social circuit. But then, what would there be to live for? What would life be worth?

Two of the milk vendors had put down their loads and sat on the ground smoking bidis. They were probably returning from the ashram. Jayaram went and sat down beside them. They looked at him briefly, without much curiosity, then resumed their talk. One of them unwrapped a filthy rag he had tied round his leg as a bandage, squeezed the juice of a plant on the wound and tied it up again. "One can't dream of wearing shoes or slippers in this life," he said. The other made no comment and went on puffing at his bidis. Jayaram remembered the pile of shoes at home. He had come face to face with poverty before, but had always looked at it from a different point of view: reading about it in books; tossing a coin into a blind beggar's bowl through his car window; listening to a distressed worker reciting, with hands folded together, a tale of woe, in his office. Now he was listening to the sorrows of a man, sheltering in the shade of the same tree as himself, resting from the same fatigue. The other man said, "Talk about shoes? Last winter, my mother died shivering in the cold. She kept asking for a blanket, but how could I afford

one?" Jayaram remembered his airconditioned home. The two milkmen threw away their burnt-out bidis and got up, lifting their loads to their shoulders, and walked down the slope with long strides. Jayaram, alone under the tree now, was obliged to follow.

He had thought the journey would never end but suddenly, coming round a bend, he saw the ashram gates and a portion of the complex. Rows of cars were parked in front of the building, and among them were some taxi cabs. How could these vehicles have crossed the river and that hilly path? It seemed a miracle to Jayaram. He felt he *had* to unravel this mystery and approached the line of cars before he entered the ashram building. On speaking to the drivers of the cars, he found that the explanation was simple. There was another route to the ashram, which did not require crossing the river or that endless walk; there was a bridge across the river, a few miles further on, and an asphalt road all the way to the ashram. The cars were able to drive down quite easily. Apparently, the foreign disciples knew of this route. There were many disciples of the Baba who lived in the towns nearby and were able to drive there in the morning and return the same evening. However, there was not much traffic on this route as relatively few people came to the ashram and there were no towns or villages in the vicinity. No buses plied to and fro and one had to arrange private transportation to reach the ashram.

Jayaram felt glad that he had not known of this alternative route, or else he would have missed an enriching experience. The ashram gates were open and he could see rows of houses inside. On getting closer he found that these houses were plainly built and furnished; there was no sign of the five-star facilities he had heard of. He asked the first man he met at the ashram, where the living quarters were and the man pointed to a large building.

It had several large rooms which was reminiscent of the waiting-rooms at a railway station. There were many people there already, whose belongings were strewn all over the place in disorder. Bathers emerged, bare-bodied and wet, from the attached bathrooms and changed their garments in full public view. Jayaram could even see some ladies in one corner. They too were busy with their toilet, undeterred by the lack of privacy. Without waiting to ask anyone, Jayaram entered one of the vacant bathrooms. The water was icy cold and he had a thorough wash. Then he sat down on the floor, seeking relief from the fatigue of the night's journey and the long walk up to the ashram, as well as the assorted anxieties that kept flitting through his mind. He never knew when sleep overcame him. It was the sound of a gong that woke him up.

Dressing himself hurriedly he came out of the bathroom and found the place suddenly quiet. The people who occupied the various rooms had gone into meditation, eyes closed and legs folded in the lotus posture. Not knowing what to do he stepped out of the building and walked towards the other buildings in the ashram. Everywhere he found the same situation: the ashram-dwellers had all gone into temporary hibernation, each one where he had been sitting. A little further on was the ashram kitchen. He walked in. The fires were burning in the hearth but the four people within, obviously cooks, were squatting on the floor, meditating.

While the others were meditating thus, Jayaram made a round of the ashram. There was an office, a reception room, a dining hall and a prayer hall. Since Jayaram intended to stay in the ashram for a few days, he was keen to see what the living rooms were like. There were some small rooms in a double-storeyed building. The doors were open and Jayaram found the occupants of each room deep in meditation. One of the rooms on the upper floor seemed to be unoccupied and Jayaram walked in to inspect the facilities. The room was very tidy. The

attached bathroom too was clean and well-maintained. Jayaram lay down on the bed to test the softness of the mattress and closed his eyes, savouring the atmosphere. Unknowingly, he fell into deep sleep.

He woke up, opened his eyes and looked at his watch. He had been asleep for almost two hours. He closed his eyes once again and tried to recall the surroundings he was in. While the others had been meditating with their eyes shut he had fallen asleep. Now he could hear the soft sounds of people moving about and talking to each other. The ceiling fan whirred overhead, providing relief from the heat. All Jayaram could feel now was a sense of overwhelming relief, brought on by sleep. Such a feeling had come to him once during his schooldays, in the long summer holidays, after his examinations were over. Years later, he had gone on a long holiday, taking in many new places; but that sense of lightness had never returned. He had even spent twenty days in hospital once, resting and recuperating, but never experienced the same feeling again. The threat of returning to the rigours of everyday life had never been absent.

Fully awake now, he sat up on the bed. On a chair in front of him sat an elderly gentleman. Jayaram felt embarrassed for having entered his room and slept on his bed uninvited. But before he could apologise the gentleman said, "I have disturbed you in your sleep; please excuse me."

"But I walked in without ..." Jayaram began.

"I'll go out and close the doors if you wish to sleep," the man said, not allowing Jayaram to finish his sentence. "But I think you should have something to eat first."

And without giving him a chance to demur the gentleman took Jayaram with him to the dining hall. "I've eaten already," he said, "but I'll give you company while you eat."

Most people had finished eating. Jayaram's escort made him sit down and ordered some snacks for him. "Look, Sir,"

he said, "I haven't even told you my name yet. I'm Professor Ram, and I've been a disciple of the Baba's for many years now. I keep coming back to the ashram from time to time. It looks as though you've come here for the first time."

Jayaram nodded, his mouth full. The food was tasty and well-prepared. The professor took great care of Jayaram as he ate and the latter introduced himself briefly. However, he revealed nothing of his problem, only telling the professor that he had come for a *darshan* of the Baba – the spiritual encounter of a devotee with the object of his adoration. "Please don't be worried," the professor assured him, "all the arrangements will be made."

And indeed, the professor took charge of Jayaram from that moment. Taking Jayaram to his own room, he arranged for another cot and mattress, requesting Jayaram to stay there as long as he wished. Jayaram had not expected his immediate problem of finding accommodation in the ashram to be solved so easily. Now he settled comfortably in the room and began a long conversation with the professor. He told the professor that he had only slight knowledge of the ashram and the Baba himself; that was why he had arrived without prior intimation.

"What made you decide to come here suddenly?" the professor asked.

Still concealing the truth, Jayaram replied, "I had been thinking about it for a long time; last night I suddenly decided to take the bus."

"You are a noble soul," the professor said. "Most people come here to escape some personal problem."

"Was that why you came?" Jayaram asked.

"Yes, that was what brought me here in the first place," the professor replied. Then, seeing Jayaram look at him with questioning eyes he added, "I'd fallen in love with a young girl in my middle age. She was my student."

If the gentleman had not looked absolutely grave while he was saying this, Jayaram might have thought he was joking. The professor turned his gaze away and stared vacantly into space through the window. Jayaram felt sorry for the question he had asked; he had disclosed nothing about himself, but had tried to pry into the secrets of another. This was not just impolite; it was downright cruel.

The professor was silent. Jayaram did not dare to question him further. After a while the professor faced him again and said, "Let's go downstairs. The Baba will be out for his walk now."

As they walked down the stairs Jayaram could not check the question that had been flitting through his mind. "Did you find a solution to your problem?" he asked the professor.

"Yes. The Baba took my problem away."

Although he found the answer vague and incomplete, Jayaram did not question him further. They joined a group of about ten people, all of whom were hurrying to meet the Baba.

Jayaram had seen the Baba's photograph earlier and also read various articles appearing about him at different times–some adulatory, others critical. He had heard tales of the Baba's strengths and weaknesses from friends and acquaintances. But the bearded person he saw now, face to face, bore no resemblance to the spiritually elevated being he had imagined. Jayaram would probably have failed to recognise him had he seen him in a crowd of bearded faces.

Baisakhi Baba was going round the ashram with a group of disciples. He walked in front, bare feet and in ochre robes and the disciples trailed him, at a respectful distance. Suddenly the Baba stopped in an open space and rearranged the folds of the sheet he had wrapped around himself. Then, crinkling up the palm of his right hand into a hollow he said, "I need sixty-four caves to be built here."

"No problem at all, Baba; it will be done," said a foreign disciple, making an entry in a notebook.

"Sixty-four caves, in which sixty-four persons can meditate together. And there must be a calm atmosphere for meditation."

"The caves will be soundproofed," the foreign disciple said.

"It must be cool inside the caves, so that the body's discomfort does not affect the mind," the Baba went on. "I am reminded of the *Shanti Parva* in the *Mahabharat.* While the patriarch Bhishma was lying on his bed of arrows, Krishna requested him to give a discourse on the secrets of yoga, but Bhishma said the arrows were giving him so much pain that his mind was unable to function. It was Krishna who released him from his agony."

"The caves will be airconditioned ..."

"No, no," the Baba said, "I want everything to be natural. A murmuring stream flowing past the caves, with a cooling breeze that reaches the meditator's soul." The Baba closed his eyes, as though he himself was lost in meditation on the bank of some heavenly stream, fanned by a gentle breeze.

"Easiest thing in the world," the foreign disciple said. The professor informed Jayaram that he was a renowned French architect. He quickly produced a sketch in his notebook and gave it to the Baba to examine. The Baba seemed pleased. But suddenly he flung the notebook to the ground, gathered up his loose robe in one hand and started to run. The others ran after him and without trying to find out what was happening Jayaram found himself joining the race, together with the professor. Now he saw, at some distance, the foal of a deer. The Baba had acquired a menagerie of deer and peacocks to give the ashram a natural as well as authentic look, for did not the ashrams of Vedic times have these animals? The Baba ran to catch the foal. It was not a difficult feat, for the foal was completely encircled by the Baba's disciples and unable to flee. The Baba sat down on the ground, held the foal securely, plucked a few strands of grass and held them out to the deer, for it to munch. It was a beautiful, touching sight,

although the deer refused the grass. One of the Baba's foreign disciples, who was pointed out to Jayaram as a famous photographer, immortalised the scene with his camera. The Baba cooperated fully by posing with the deer, holding the animal at different angles, pretending to be feeding it. But the young deer refused to cooperate, turning its muzzle away from the grass and struggling to escape. The Baba let go of the foal and assumed the lotus posture, after rearranging the sheet draped round his shoulders. His disciples, who were obviously familiar with his habits, also sat down in front of him in the yogic posture.

"When Brahmadutta was the king of Kashi," the Baba began, "the Buddha was incarnated in the form of a deer." The Baba then narrated the Jataka story to his disciples. Jayaram had not heard it before; moreover, the Baba's style of narration was extremely attractive. Jayaram listened to the tale of the golden deer and the greedy merchant, fascinated.

"And the Buddha said to his disciples: 'I was that golden deer, and Brahmadutta was the merchant,'" the Baba said, concluding his narration.

Everyone remained seated in silence for a while after the story had ended. The Baba stood up and prepared to leave. The others got up too, but the Baba gestured that they were not to follow him. He left alone, walking slowly, and disappeared from view.

"Let's go to the prayer hall," the professor said to Jayaram. Jayaram's mind had not yet been freed from the effect of the Jataka story. He quietly followed the professor. "Are there any special rules for prayer?" he asked, as they approached the prayer hall.

"Which deities have been installed in the temple?" "There's no temple here," the professor said, "it's just a large hall. You are free to come here at any time and pray to anyone you like, in any manner you choose."

They had to pass through many doors and thick screens before they gained access to the hall. The sudden darkness within, after the brightness outside, seemed total; one stumbled on the threshold unless one was used to the place. The professor led him inside by the hand. When Jayaram had adjusted his eyesight to the darkness he could make out the shapes of several people squatting on the carpet, praying. After he had stumbled over a number of these people, the professor and he found a vacant spot and sat down. The professor had explained that there was only one rule that had to be observed while praying: one had to join hands with the persons praying on either side. The professor was holding his left hand and Jayaram extended his right hand in the darkness to the unknown person seated on his right.

Not a sound could be heard in the prayer hall; the atmosphere was heavy with the sweet scent of incense. The stifling darkness lent a touch of mystery to the airconditioned hall. Jayaram's reaching hand was grasped in a soft hand; soft feminine fingers were intertwined with his own. This touch of an unknown woman's body was a totally new experience for him. Who could the lady be? He tried to remember the faces of the ladies he had seen that morning in the reception hall. He had paid little attention to the body and its needs after he had become engrossed in the world of commerce. Now he remembered his younger days. Mere proximity to a female had set him quivering. Then he remembered the scandals emanating from the ashram. The pressure of the hand resting on his hand signalled no excess; it seemed the most natural thing in the world. Who could it be — someone old, middle-aged, or young? Jayaram could think of no gods or goddesses; no mantras came to his mind now; but he could hear the tones of the Baba's voice narrating the Jataka legend. He felt it was the Buddha himself, reincarnated in the Baba, narrating the story to his disciples. Jayaram was conscious

of his insignificance. Was he then the sinning merchant of the story?

Many stray thoughts beset him. Although he had left home only hours ago it seemed as though ages had passed. In a moment of utter helplessness he had held out his hand, hoping someone would grasp it and pull him up to safety; now one of his hands was intertwined with someone's he had known only briefly while the other was held by a totally unknown hand. But what comfort flowed from the touch of those unfamiliar hands! They were living supports.

The lady on his right let go of his hand, stood up and walked out of the prayer hall. Jayaram wanted to follow her and have a look at her, but he realised the reality could be a let down. Besides, the touch of that hand had been totally impersonal. Nevertheless, it had been enough to stir him, as he had not had such an experience in years. He decided to turn his mind away from the lady, to prayers. But the words of the prayer were scattered in the corners of his mind. He released the professor's hand and got up to go.

Now that he was alone he decided to explore the rest of the ashram. He took a different route and reached the ashram's bookstore. There were several artifacts on sale here, all related to the Baba: his photographs, rings, pendants and other items of jewellery bearing his portrait, taped recordings of his discourses, a collection of his writings, with his picture on the cover. There were, in addition, items of daily use — umbrellas, walking shoes and sticks, pens, flashlights, etc. — all bearing his portrait and all overpriced. He picked up a book and leafed through it. It was the third volume in a series of the Baba's discourses. Some of the precepts contained in it seemed trite — such as the advice to mothers to take good care of their babies; however, there were other aphorisms that he found obscure and mystifying. He put the book aside and turned to examine something else. The storekeeper was a young man

with a shaven head, engrossed in reading a volume of the Baba's discourses with total concentration. There was no other customer. Seeing Jayaram undecided, the storekeeper rose and pointed to the book Jayaram had been browsing through. "There are lots of good thoughts in that book," he said.

"I've nothing to buy," Jayaram said. "I was just looking through the articles in the shop."

"This tape has all the things you can find in the book, in the Baba's own voice," the storekeeper said, pointing now to a portable cassette-player which hung by its strap from his shoulder. Jayaram saw the earphone plugged into the young man's ear. He pulled it out and came and stood beside Jayaram.

What had brought this young man to the ashram, to mind the bookstore? What circumstances had turned him, at this tender age, into a devotee? Had he been disappointed in love, like the professor? Had he failed an examination, quarrelled with folks at home, or had he been caught stealing? Or had burgeoning wisdom made him renounce the world? The young man's face contained no answers to any of these questions. He seemed perfectly happy carrying out the responsibility that had been entrusted upon him, sustained by the Baba's greatness.

"Will you buy something?" he asked Jayaram.

"No, I was just browsing."

"I suggest you buy a cassette," the storekeeper said.

"I don't have a cassette-player."

"You can borrow mine and return it after you've listened to the tape," the man said. His tone indicated he was sincere in his offer, not just being polite. He really would have lent Jayaram his cassette-player. He probably wanted the Baba's voice to reach as many ears as possible. "No, no," Jayaram said quickly, "But I'll buy a cassette before I return home."

When would that be? Where was his home? What did "home" mean anyway? This bookstore was the young man's

home. The professor's was the little cell he occupied. Home to the Baba's devotees was this tree-lined ashram on the river's bank. And the Baba's home? Where was the Buddha's home? Thanking the young man, Jayaram turned — so was this home after all? — homewards.

The professor was there already. When Jayaram arrived the professor asked him to join him for dinner. But Jayaram pleaded he was not hungry and the professor went down to dinner alone. Jayaram lay down on the bed once more, thinking of the unknown hand in the darkened room. Many intriguing thoughts came to him. He had found it difficult to get sleep at home but here, amid all these fancies, sleep came freely. Various dreams came too, and they were not fearful as his dreams had been of late. Although he could not remember any particular dream on awaking, the impression that remained made him feel happy. He sat up and looked out through the window.

He could see some trees and a small portion of the sky. The sky was clear though a few small patches of cloud floated about lazily. Evening had arrived and the sky was changing colour. The sunlight had turned a soft orange. It seemed as though the sky was about to turn cool and red.

The professor returned and said, "Come, let's go to the Baba's prayer meeting." Jayaram had a quick wash and joined the professor outside. "There's no arrangement for tea in the ashram," the professor said, "but I can make some for you in the room if you want it." Jayaram said, however, that he did not need tea, although he was accustomed to tea in the evening.

There was no fixed time or place for the Baba's prayer meetings. This evening he had chosen to hold it on the banks of the stream, where his devotees surrounded him. The Baba sat quietly, picking up sheets of paper out of a pile, folding them into origami boats and sending them floating down the

current. The devotees watched the Baba's childish play in fascination, as though discovering untold depths of significance in it. Jayaram spotted three ladies among the devotees and told himself that the prettiest among them was the owner of the mysterious hand. He would find an excuse to strike up a conversation with her. These thoughts seemed to reverse the flow of time for him; the professor sitting next to him was the chiding adult of days gone by.

When he grew tired of making paper boats the Baba folded a sheet of paper into a plane, which he tossed upwards in the direction of his devotees. The wind carried it up, and a competition began among the disciples to capture the flying missile. However, the plane eluded everyone and landed on the fork of a tree.

Now the Baba picked up another sheet of paper and drew a circle on it. "This is the beginning," he said, "and this — drawing another circle above the first one — is the goal." He drew a number of lines, in crayons of different colours, linking the origin to the goal. "These are the various paths to the goal," he said. "Some are straight and easy; others, complex and difficult." He drew a series of crosses, in different colours again, to indicate the difficulties that could be encountered on some paths. "Everyone who begins a journey," he went on, "chooses different paths. However, not everyone is able to reach the goal. Some stray on the path; others grow tired; some change the objective after reaching half-way. But some do reach their goal. Some use boats to get there; others fly there in planes. And others take the bus."

The Baba put down the sheet of paper, now covered with coloured lines, and picked up a clean sheet. Turning it this way and that he asked, "Is it possible to make a bus out of this sheet of paper?"

"Very easily, Baba," the French architect said, taking the sheet of paper out of the Baba's hand and starting to fold it

into a bus. While he was doing this someone asked, "Baba, what is the goal of life?"

"Life can have different goals," the Baba replied. "Each person sets his own goal. Someone wants to become the prime minister; someone wants fame as a writer and someone wants to set up a factory." Had the Baba found out about him then? "And someone wants nothing more out of life than two handfuls of rice to stay alive. More important than the goal itself is what one thinks about the goal. Does each one know rightly what his goal is?"

The Baba was silent. Jayaram would have liked him to be more explicit. But now the Baba was looking at the French architect. He had been trying again and again to fold the sheet of paper into a bus but had not succeeded. The Baba took the folded sheet of paper from him and looked at it. "This thing is what we call a kula. It's a kind of basket we use to winnow rice in," the Baba said. Everyone laughed. The Baba stood up and everyone knew the prayer meeting was over.

The professor and Jayaram stayed on after the others had left. It was as though by some mutual telepathy they had agreed to stay on together, though nothing had been said. There was nothing to be said. Darkness soon covered everything. There was still some time before moonrise. They suddenly rose to go. The professor switched on his flashlight to light the way.

Jayaram asked the professor to accompany him to the bookstore, where he would buy some clothing he needed for his stay at the ashram. There was a different young man in charge now. If this young man had not had long hair, Jayaram could have mistaken him for the person he had met earlier. Jayaram bought the ochre robe which served as the regulation uniform at the ashram and they walked back to their room. The professor sat down to meditate while Jayaram lay down on his bed and reviewed the day's events.

He was unable, at that moment, to form any clear impression of the Baba. He could see nothing extraordinary in his talk or behaviour. But the reverence which the others had for the Baba impressed him. He had also liked the free atmosphere at the ashram. He decided he would stay on for some more time, whether or not the Baba possessed supernatural powers, whether or not he helped Jayaram to find a solution to his problem.

Thus did Jayaram settle into the ashram's routine. The professor was an uncomplicated person and Jayaram had no problems in sharing his room; on the contrary, he found he had much to learn from the professor's courtesy, humility and spirit of service. He got to know the rules of the ashram. The principle rule here was that there was no such thing as a rule. Each one was free to follow his inclinations. And yet, through some wonderful chemistry, everything got done without a major hassle, if not with total efficiency. Perhaps it was because everyone loved and obeyed the Baba and wanted the ashram to function smoothly.

Jayaram had learnt to close his eyes and sit in meditation at the appointed hour, and he visited the prayer hall from time to time. However, after that first encounter, he never had the good fortune to hold a soft feminine hand in the darkness; nor was he fortunate enough to strike up an acquaintance with the mysterious lady. To tell the truth, he no longer thought about her as there were many other pretty young women to be seen.

Most of his time was spent in the professor's company. However, he had neither tried to find out more about the professor's personal life nor told him anything of his own problems. But remembering his factory, he asked the professor one day, "How can I get a personal interview with the Baba?" Of course, he did go regularly to the Baba's prayer meetings, but the questions put to the Baba there were extremely intellectual and general: for example, "Is the world's civilisation

progressing or marching backwards?", "Must life have a goal?", etc. No questions were asked at these meetings about failures in love, losses in business or setbacks in service. The professor told Jayaram, without asking any questions, "I'll try to arrange a personal interview for you as early as possible."

The professor was able to get an appointment for him for the same evening and Jayaram set out hesitantly to meet the Baba alone. The Baba lived in the inner rooms of a building in an isolated corner. He crossed many rooms and corridors, made many inquiries and finally arrived at the Baba's private quarters. "I have an appointment with the Baba," he told the person on duty. He was asked to walk straight in. The room, screened from all sides, was almost dark and it took him a while to get adjusted to the light. The room was airconditioned, with a thick carpet covering the floor. There was no furniture in the room except for a large, ornate throne-like chair, on which the Baba was seated. A woman devotee sat at his feet, with her head resting on the Baba's lap. Jayaram, embarrassed at having invaded the Baba's privacy, was about to walk out when the Baba waved his hand to beckon and signalled that he was to be seated. Since there was no other chair, Jayaram sat down on the floor. The Baba placed his hand on Jayaram's head in blessing.

Jayaram's mind was suddenly flooded with doubts. So was it all true — all that he had heard about Baisakhi Baba and his ashram? Was this a fake? What was his relationship with the women in the ashram? Was such luxury necessary for a spiritual life? He felt the urge to get up from this imposter's feet and quit the ashram at once. But the professor's faith in the Baba put him in a fix, for he believed the professor to be an honest as well as a perceptive person. How could the professor have given his devotion and trust to a fraud?

By now his eyes were completely adjusted to the dark and he could see everything in the room clearly. The woman lifted

her head off the Baba's lap and looked at him with a gentle smile. She was the mysterious beauty! She had looked at him and smiled as though she knew him well and Jayaram was overjoyed. The Baba now placed his other hand on her head and Jayaram felt as though a wave of intimacy passed from her to him through the Baba's intervening body, establishing a personal relationship.

Many moments passed in silence. She got up to leave and looked at Jayaram, her eyes bidding him farewell. Jayaram felt he would have to come to a decision immediately about his relationship with the Baba and the ashram; accordingly he said to the Baba, when the woman had left, "Baba, I've come to you with a personal problem."

"Each person has a variety of problems," the Baba said, turning the individual's quest into a universal predicament. "Like Jesus Christ, we walk with the burden of our problems on our shoulders."

"My factory is lying idle," Jayaram said, insistent. "Power was unavailable, after everything had been completed. I wasn't able to get the factory to run, in spite of all my efforts."

The Baba said nothing in reply. It's all a sham, Jayaram told himself. Lechery in the name of religion. After a long silence Jayaram said, his voice tinged with irritation, "Baba..."

"All will be well," the Baba said, stroking his head with his palm.

How will it? he thought angrily. Will the Baba persuade Indra to bring rain? Or instruct the minister concerned to sanction power? Order the bank not to send demand notices for repayment of the loan? What does the Baba know of industry? Why, he doesn't even know his name or address!

And the Baba said, as though in reply to his thoughts, "Let me know the name and address of your factory." Jayaram was astounded. This little episode seemed to revive his faith in the

Baba. He felt slightly fearful because he had doubted the Baba. He took his visiting card out of his pocket and placed it in the Baba's hand, rising to depart, feeling ashamed of himself.

"There is no need to worry," the Baba said.

Slightly consoled, slightly apprehensive, slightly sceptical, he returned to his room. The professor seemed to be waiting. "You are fortunate," the professor said to him. "How quickly you were able to meet the Baba alone and how quickly your problem was solved!"

"How do you know my problems are solved?"

"If you've told the Baba everything, you should think no more about it," the professor said. "Your worries are over."

But as Jayaram appeared to be worried still the professor said, "Come, let's go for a long walk. It'll relax you."

They walked along the same path that he had followed while coming to the ashram and the professor told Jayaram many things about himself. Now Jayaram too revealed his problem to the professor, keeping nothing back. The professor was insistent that Jayaram had no cause to worry now, after he had told the Baba everything. Although Jayaram was not, at that moment, unduly concerned about his factory, he said, for the sake of argument, "How do you expect me not to worry? I've put all my money in the factory. What'll I do now if there is no power?"

"The Baba says each situation is full of possibilities," the professor said. "How can the present tell you about the future? You say all your problems are caused by the absence of rain. Who knows, it might rain so heavily tonight that all the reservoirs will be filled and power will flow to your factory."

There was logic in the statement. Jayaram felt optimistic again. Although he had resolved never to pry into the professor's past, he was unable to restrain himself now. "Did the Baba solve your problems as well?" he asked.

"He asked me not to worry. Then, after I had spent a few days at the ashram, I realised that the matter which had appeared to me as such a serious problem was no problem at all. I had gone wrong in my thinking. And as the problem had arisen from the error in my thinking, it disappeared. That too is a solution, isn't it?"

By the time they had crossed the river and come to the temple of Shesh Nath, Jayaram's mind was largely at peace. The professor said, "I need to buy a few small things in the market. Let's go and have a cup of tea together."

Jayaram saw a post office open and decided to call up his home. After a lot of difficulty he was able to get through. There was no one at home; the servant informed him that his wife and children were at the cinema. His home seemed to be functioning normally even in his absence, and this made Jayaram feel both happy and disappointed.

The professor made his purchases, they had their tea, paid their respects to Lord Shesh Nath and took the ferry back to the ashram, by which time Jayaram was feeling cheerful and relaxed. The path from the river bank to the ashram no longer seemed difficult and they made it in good time. Jayaram had already decided to extend his stay.

The next morning he was informed that the Baba was going to Bombay for a day and had desired that Jayaram should accompany him. When Jayaram told the professor of this, the latter said, "That's very good. The Baba has many highly placed devotees in Bombay and you'll get to know them." Jayaram was informed by the ashram office that his ticket to Bombay had been purchased and hotel bookings had been made for their stay. All expenses were being met out of the ashram's trust funds. As Jayaram had not paid anything yet for his board and accommodation at the ashram he wrote out a cheque to the trust for a large amount, which would cover the price of his ticket.

Travelling with the Baba was an unforgettable experience. There was a prayer meeting at a devotee's home in the city before they boarded the flight. The airport was crowded with the Baba's devotees; on landing at Bombay they were greeted by another crowd with garlands and slogans of "Glory to Baisakhi Baba!" The lobby of the hotel, the most luxurious in Bombay, was bursting with devotees and sightseers. When the Baba emerged from his room, washed and refreshed, arrangements for another prayer-meeting at the hotel had been made. The hall was airconditioned and softly lit; the scent of incense created a hypnotic atmosphere. As soon as the Baba took his seat on the only chair, the soft murmur of voices ceased. Then followed the questions and answers.

Seated in one corner, Jayaram made a survey of that worshipful crowd. Among them were film stars, leaders of industry and prominent businessmen. The elderly gentleman seated at the Baba's feet, gazing at his face in adoration, was a renowned intellectual who had once been a member of the cabinet in the union government. He had given up everything to become the Baba's follower. Why, Jayaram asked himself, did he still have doubts about the Baba when so many famous personalities had accepted him totally? Was it because his objective was still unrealised, his problem unsolved? Did devotion lay down such conditions?

The next morning there was a steady flow of devotees to meet the Baba. Several businessmen and industrialists came to discuss the management of the ashram trust. The Baba asked Jayaram to sit beside him while this discussion was in progress. Various matters were discussed and proposals made: schools and hospitals were to be set up, farms and orchards created on the ashram lands. A bakery was to be started to supply bread to the inmates of the ashram. The Baba took little part in the discussion but all decisions were taken in his presence and with his obvious approval. Jayaram was

consulted on a number of points. After the discussion had been in progress for some time, a famous actress came to see the Baba. Jayaram remembered that there had been considerable gossip regarding the Baba's relationship with her. Jayaram and the others left the room when she arrived.

He did not know how the time passed in Bombay. He was happy to be returning to the ashram. He sat next to the Baba on the return flight. The Baba was busy playing video games on a hand-held computer. Jayaram tried to concentrate on a volume of the Baba's discourses. When the Baba grew tired of the video games he put the toy away and turned to Jayaram. He showed Jayaram an expensive diamond ring which he was wearing. Jayaram expressed his admiration of the ring. The Baba said it was a gift from the actress. Then, after a while, the Baba said, looking at Jayaram's face, "Don't worry; everything is going to be well."

Jayaram put the book aside and closed his eyes. The plane was beginning the descent for the landing. No, he had no worries now. Jayaram had decided that after he returned to the ashram he would get busy in setting up a bakery.

Rivals

It's just my luck, Rangnath thought to himself, that makes such things happen. They had gone to the same school, studied in the same class and joined the same firm on the same day. For years their lives had followed parallel courses, to the extent that they had, during the same year, shared the same house in the same town. But gradually their lives took different turns. Jaisingh got married, had children and simultaneously, developed high ambitions; Rangnath immersed himself fully in his work, remained single and found in the company the sum total of his existence. While Rangnath remained steadfast in his devotion to work, Jaisingh cultivated his superiors in the office and suddenly one day he overtook Rangnath and advanced to a higher position.

It had been a day of great sorrow and regret for Rangnath. He had dedicated the greater part of his life to the service of the company. He had no other interest except selling the agricultural implements which the company manufactured. Although many of his friends had hopped from one job to another during those twenty years, Rangnath, like Jaisingh, had remained glued to the same employer. He felt he had no patience to look for a new job at this point in his life. But now, the thought of resigning did cross his mind. Since he had no

family liabilities and was in no want, he did feel that there was no need for him to swallow such an insult. Then he thought of sending an application against Jaisingh, to the company directors. There was much that he had come to know during these twenty years about Jaisingh's flaws and weaknesses; in fact Jaisingh himself had confessed to several of his transgressions to Rangnath. But would it be proper to make use of all that he knew to put Jaisingh in trouble? Now Rangnath's resentment was directed against the company bosses. Surely they should have been able to make a proper assessment and promote the more deserving employee! There were several advantages in working for a multinational company, but what did the foreign bosses know about the people in India? Although most of the company's shares were owned by Indians, the management still lay in foreign hands. Rangnath knew about the many skeletons in their cupboards too. Should he send an anonymous letter to the government? But his sense of fair play ruled this out. He thought he would resign and set up his factory to produce agricultural implements. Who knew, he might even be able to buy out this company some day!

This was only a daydream, of course. But he had often resorted to it when his superiors had taken him to task. To make the dream come true he had even collected various documents which would help him in setting up an agricultural-implements factory. He had built up a comprehensive dossier of these documents, which he liked to study during moments of depression. The dossier contained several documents which gave him confidence — for instance, a complete project report for setting up such a factory; a variety of application forms to be addressed to the government departments; rules for setting up a new factory, etc. He had spent years, laboriously compiling this dossier, which he constantly updated. The factory which he had once thought of setting up for a few lakhs

of rupees would now cost at least a crore. Meanwhile, the industrial policies of the government had changed several times and Rangnath was undecided whether his dream project would be large, medium or small in scale. Anyway, the dossier was self-contained and complete in all respects. It was his private domain, his empire into which he could retreat whenever he wished.

That night, after Jaisingh had been promoted, Rangnath was lost in the world of imagination which the dossier inspired. In front of him lay an old revenue map which he had acquired years ago while on tour, showing various government and private lands. He had already decided where he would set up his dream factory and at this moment he was busy erecting it, on a vacant plot on the map. To help him in this task he had a glass of whisky close to his left hand, while on his right were sketch-plans for factories, cut out of various professional journals. By the time he had acquired the land, in his world of make-believe, obtained a variety of government sanctions and permits, imported the machinery from sources overseas and begun production, it was late into the night. He got up and went to bed, but until sleep came he was busy formulating plans to market his implements and drawing up balance sheets.

When he got up in the morning his head was throbbing from inadequate sleep and an excess of alcohol. He picked up the pile of papers scattered on the table, put them back carefully into the file and locked it away in his steel cupboard. He told himself he would return to those papers again that evening. He went to the office at the scheduled time and busied himself, as was his habit, in going through the day's correspondence. Then he buried himself in his daily routine. But he was conscious that one important activity remained to be performed — meeting Jaisingh and talking about his promotion. How was he to do it? Surely, if he had been in Jaisingh's place, he would have gone to his colleague to give

him the news of his own promotion. Well, what could be done if some people were lacking in basic courtesies?

Finally it was he who went to Jaisingh's room. The latter's desk was piled high with papers — tokens of the new responsibilities he had taken on, and he looked extremely busy. Even then, he rose from his chair on seeing Rangnath and said, "I've been planning all morning to come and see you, but haven't been able to get out. Good thing you came over. What will you have — tea or coffee?" Trying to impress me, aren't you? Rangnath thought. As though I don't know how much work you put in. Tea or coffee indeed! Did it take you just one day to forget that I don't like coffee? "Congratulations!" he said aloud. Jaisingh ordered tea and as they sipped it together they talked as though old times had returned. But something seemed to be lacking.

After that day his ties with Jaisingh were severed. Neither made any effort to restore former relationships. Although he never neglected his work, Rangnath received the impression that his bosses felt he had become careless in his work. There was no reason to question his ability, for he fulfilled the sales targets of the company; yet he felt that Jaisingh and the others in the office were his adversaries. In such moments of depression he would return to his beloved dossier for comfort.

Rangnath received another shock a few years later when the foreign directors of the company sold away their shares to Indian investors and when a local industrialist, who held the majority of the shares, took over the management. Rangnath had hoped that sooner or later he would receive justice from the foreign directors, but now those hopes were dashed. Soon the retrenchment and transfers of the company's staff began and in consequence of this process, Rangnath found himself directly subordinate to Jaisingh.

At first he was reluctant to accept the new relationship but gradually grew accustomed to it. Jaisingh, being hardworking

and efficient, quickly gained the confidence of the new management. His attitude towards Rangnath was positive, and had the latter reciprocated there would have been no problems. But Rangnath began a subdued campaign of non-cooperation. Jaisingh was aware of this, but did not allow matters to grow. He maintained a façade of cordiality, giving Rangnath no chance to complain. But this calculated relationship could not have survived long. The company was passing through hard times; sales were declining and the directors were dissatisfied. The company officials were working under great pressure and one day Jaisingh spoke harshly to Rangnath at a meeting. Rangnath would have walked out of the room, but the ingrained discipline of years made him listen quietly to the rebuke.

That day Rangnath did not attempt to escape into his dream territory; instead, he decided he would teach Jaisingh a lesson. He wished he had taken appropriate measures to put Jaisingh in his place when the foreign directors had been in control; but it was not too late to begin. He knew many of Jaisingh's weaknesses. He started compiling a list of charges that could be made against him. Many incidents came to his mind: for instance, handing in false reports to the company, extending a tour for no good reason, making a wrong decision that put the company to loss, fomenting ill-will among subordinate staff, etc. These, however, were only vague charges; he had no precise record or memory of the dates and times at which Jaisingh had committed these transgressions. If an accusation had to be made, precise information would be necessary. He resolved that from the very next day he would start collecting hard evidence against Jaisingh from old files and documents.

But he could not find the kind of information he was looking for, though he ferreted deep into old records. It was necessary to be cautious in his search so that Jaisingh suspected nothing. However, he was determined to uncover something,

no matter how long it took. Finally, he decided that although he could discover nothing sufficiently incriminating in Jaisingh's past, he would keep a sharp lookout for any future activity on Jaisingh's part that could be used against him. From that day he put aside his old dossier and started a new one, dedicated to Jaisingh.

His relationship with Jaisingh turned bitter, at least on his part. He stopped meeting him unless it was absolutely necessary. Communication between them was restricted to office correspondence. Jaisingh made no attempt either to improve the relationship; on the contrary, he distanced himself from Rangnath. His official dealings with Rangnath grew harsh. The old friendship vanished and now they were only senior official and subordinate.

The company's misfortunes continued. Many new rivals had arisen and competition was stiff. The new shareholders wanted higher profits, which eluded them. The pressure on all company employees was increasing and it most affected the sales department, where Rangnath worked. His responsibilities had increased manifold and he had to slog for long hours, both night and day, which left little time for anything else. But he never forgot his new dossier, in which entries were periodically made.

Some more time elapsed thus and now Jaisingh was elevated to the position of chairman, thanks to the patronage of the new directors. Rangnath bore this shock too. Jaisingh had risen to the higher ranks quite some time ago and this development was not entirely unexpected. It only strengthened Rangnath's determination to do something which would harm Jaisingh. But his dossier did not show much progress, as Jaisingh was worldly-wise as well as efficient. This was causing Rangnath many sleepless nights.

Matters took a turn for the worse when one day Jaisingh flung a file at Rangnath. He had changed completely after

becoming chairman. He no longer socialised with anyone and had become a terror in the office. He was fully supported by the directors as he had halted the decline in the company's fortunes and turned things around. Rangnath realised that it would be futile to prepare a brief against Jaisingh and present it to the directors. He remembered also that he had only a year and a half to go before he retired; if he was to do something that would hurt Jaisingh, it had to be done fast.

One night, as he was sitting over the dossier and thinking, a new strategy suddenly occurred to him. Since the day he had joined the company he had regularly been buying its shares. After he retired he would form an association of the company's shareholders and at the annual general meeting he would bring Jaisingh's misdeeds to light. Not only would he embarrass Jaisingh, he would engineer his dismissal. On the cover of the file in which the dossier was maintained he wrote, just below Jaisingh's name, the words "Shareholders' Association", in large capitals. The war would continue, unabated, even after his retirement! The thought gave him much happiness.

Now Rangnath began to collect old audit reports from the office. He studied them minutely, looking for errors and omissions on part of the management and making careful note of all the transgressions for which the chairman could be held directly responsible. He studied company law to help him in this mission. As he added new items to the growing dossier he rejoiced to think that an ordinary shareholder such as himself could put the chairman of a large company in the dock. For several offences the law stipulated fines and even imprisonment. Rangnath was confident that the proof he would build up of the company's wrongdoings would lead to at least six months in jail for Jaisingh, apart from the embarrassment it would cause the company.

He found his most effective weapon when Jaisingh inducted his son into the company. Rangnath regarded this as a violation of all norms. He read up the relevant rules which would help him establish the illegality of the appointment and prepared a comprehensive report, which was appended to the dossier. Now there was no way that Jaisingh could slip out. One's thinking can go so haywire when one is about to be destroyed. How small Jaisingh would look when Rangnath raised this issue at the meeting of shareholders! The tyrant of a chairman would plead for mercy! For this one rash act he would lose the directors' trust and perhaps his job. Fitting punishment for the disregard he had shown Rangnath.

But the case built up so carefully that night at home did not seem quite as convincing when he reached the office next morning. At this time Jaisingh's domination of the office was total. He was feared by all, including — though he would never have admitted it — Rangnath himself. When Jaisingh called for a meeting everyone came well-prepared. There was no telling where the axe would fall!

Rangnath had by now acquiesced to his fate. His only objective was to settle accounts with Jaisingh once he had retired and formed an association of the shareholders. He kept as great a distance between Jaisingh and himself as possible. Only a few months more! Then their respective fates would be on trial.

And before he knew it those months had passed, such was the pressure in the office. The day of his retirement arrived. It was a day of sorrow mingled with prospects of happiness. The office had been his entire life and the thought of leaving it, gave him a feeling of emptiness. But at the same time he was thinking of the new responsibility he was to assume and the pleasure he would derive from shattering Jaisingh's arrogance. That evening, at the farewell meeting organised for him, when some of his colleagues as well as Jaisingh spoke

of him in glowing terms, the two contrary feelings raged through his mind. And when, at the end of the meeting, Jaisingh presented him, on behalf of his colleagues, with a farewell gift, an expensive fountain-pen set, he accepted it emotionally but told himself, dramatically "With this pen shall your death warrant be written, villain!"

Later, Jaisingh called Rangnath to his office. Before they could speak, someone brought Jaisingh an urgent document and he began to read it, after apologising to Rangnath. Sitting face-to-face with his adversary, Rangnath took stock of the situation. He was no longer Jaisingh's underling. He was the future president of the shareholders' association, to whom Jaisingh would speak respectfully hereafter. And when at the first meeting Rangnath would begin his enumeration of Jaisingh's crimes, one by one, Jaisingh would cringe before him, clutching his feet, begging for mercy. He took a good look at his enemy. Jaisingh looked much older than him. Now, as he was busy reading the paper, the wrinkles on his face and forehead looked prominent; he appeared helpless, benumbed. When they had been classmates Jaisingh had been so lively, so cheerful! He looked feeble and sick now, irritable and unhappy. It would be child's play to defeat this person.

When the man had left with the document Jaisingh turned to him and said, "I had a lot of things to say to you ..." when the phone rang. Before Jaisingh could finish the conversation and replace the mouthpiece a subordinate barged in with another urgent document, saying, "The messenger is waiting to take this after it's been signed, Sir." When he had read the note and signed it, the telephone rang again. This time he remained engaged in conversation for a long time. When he had finished he said to Rangnath, "It's eight o'clock but the phone doesn't stop ringing. One doesn't get even a moment to oneself. If you'll be at home tonight, Rangnath, I'll drop in on my way back from the office."

On the way home, Rangnath was thinking how he would behave with Jaisingh. This was a heaven-sent opportunity to extract revenge for the insult he had received. He could deny Jaisingh entry into his home, speaking to him on the verandah outside and sending him away. He could tell him straight, "I don't wish to have anything to do with you. We shall meet next at the shareholders' meeting." On reaching home he took out his dossier. Now he was totally free of the company. As an independent shareholder he could publicly expose the company and its chairman. He had enough ammunition. He went through the papers again. But this time he experienced little of the anger or the thrill that he had felt before, on handling those papers. The pages with his accusations had grown stale and faint.

He heard a sound and stepped out. Jaisingh was standing on the verandah, trying to confirm whether this was indeed Rangnath's home. On seeing Rangnath he said, "I can't see very well at night now." And Rangnath replied sarcastically, "You would have remembered the place if you came here occasionally!" Suddenly Jaisingh began to cough. Rangnath took him into his drawing room, made him sit down and brought him a glass of water. He looked very unwell. He drank the water and breathed a sigh of relief.

"You complain that I've never come to your house. Do you know that for years now I've not gone out of my home in the evening? When I return from the office it's usually past nine. I've lost contact with all my friends. Home to the office; office to home — that's all I can manage.

"I wanted to rise quickly and become the chairman. You know how hard I've worked. I made it at last, but the hours of work increased from ten to fourteen. I lost my friends, and had no time for the family. My son became a dropout. I was able to find him a place in the company because I was the chairman, or else who would have given him a job?

"See what has become of me now! Fifteen different kinds of ailment! I'm surviving mostly on pills, but does that bring relief? Two years ago I had surgery for an ulcer; now it's my heart.

"And all the time I've got to worry about the company. It was different when we had foreign bosses. Our new masters want quick returns, whatever the means. It's no use telling them about the law. 'Find a way!' they'll tell you. And at the slightest excuse they threaten, 'We'll shut down the company!'

"When I went for the operation I didn't tell anybody. If the bosses had found out, they would have said, 'The man's an invalid. Fire him and get someone else!' One has to watch each step. I had hoped for some peace at the fag end of my service, but there's no peace for me."

Jaisingh became quiet after this outburst. Rangnath looked at this feeble, helpless, unhappy creature and felt sorry for him. But when he did not comment, Jaisingh said, "But why should I trouble you with my worries? You were wise not to get married. It's not easy setting up a family. As you grow older, domestic problems get worse. Sometimes you feel death is the only escape.

Anyway, let me say what I had come to tell you. You know, you were the only person in the company I was intimate with. Now I'm not on good terms with the directors either. They can throw me out at any time. So I was thinking, now that you've retired, you can help me out by doing something for the company. There's no one in the sales department with your experience or ability. The man who's going to replace you is thoroughly useless. If you agree, I could create the post of sales advisor to the company and offer you a five-year contract. That would relieve me of many of my anxieties."

Jaisingh looked at him but Rangnath said nothing. Seeing him silent, Jaisingh said again, as though asking him for a

favour, "I know you are not in need of a job, but it would be a great help if you agreed."

If this was retribution, Rangnath felt no sense of victory. As Jaisingh got up to leave, he silently walked with him to the front door.

The Emergency

Vishwanath rushed into Shastri's room looking agitated and said, "Have you heard? Emergency's been declared!" Prasad and Shastri were relaxing during the lunch break. Asking Vishwanath to sit, Shastri said, "We have another emergency on our hands, Vishwanath. Not a single new book has been added to the library during the last month." Vishwanath did not join in Shastri's frivolity. Dabbing the sweat off his face he said, "Lots of people were jailed last night. The arrests are continuing."

Everyone knew of Vishwanath's serious and timid nature and his tendency to get easily excited. Prasad said, trying to calm him down, "How does it matter to us if there is an Emergency and some people are arrested? The club should go on, that's all we care about." But Vishwanath did not look reassured. However, he offered no reply. Shastri got up to make some coffee.

The club that Prasad was talking about had only three members; the three themselves. The "books" referred to were pornographic publications; the "library" was located on the topmost shelf of Shastri's cupboard in the office. The three friends, who worked at adjoining desks, had just this one indulgence. During the lunch break they got together to

review the latest literature and share the knowledge they had acquired from their reading.

Prasad said, sipping coffee, "I've located another dirty magazine. If I can get some back numbers I'll donate them to the library." Shastri said, "We'll have to close down unless we get some new books."

The coffee had calmed Vishwanath. He said, "I can think of an easy way to pick new additions for our library. You know the red book of rules which is published each year? It has a list of banned publications. We can find out about the new books and magazines which have been published during the year."

On such matters Shastri was the most knowledgeable. "Do you know," he said, "the British Museum has a catalogue of all the items in the restricted collection in the North Library. Things like *Fanny Hill*, Burton's translation of the *Kamasutra* and so on. The collection even has a copy of *The Times* newspaper from 1882 in which the compositor had deliberately put in a four-letter word."

Prasad was not impressed by these nuggets of information. "What use are these lists?" he said. "The point is: can *we* get these books? Srinivasan returned from London only last week but didn't bring a single book. All he brought was some blue films. Let's call on him one of these days and take a look."

"You know very well, don't you," Vishwanath said sternly, "the first rule of our club is: only books! If we start on films, the next thing you know, someone'll suggest a visit to the red-light area."

"That's right," Shastri said, "only books!"

"In that case," Prasad said, "what about the packet of photographs in the library?"

"Only printed matter," Shastri said, correcting himself. "Could be photographs or books."

When they rose that afternoon it had been decided that the next day they would go on a shopping expedition and bring

back some new acquisitions for the library. But Vishwanath said he wouldn't be able to accompany them and so Shastri and Prasad went out together, during the lunch break.

They had often made such purchases from the tiny bookstall by the roadside. But everything looked different on that day. The crowds were smaller and there was an air of secrecy everywhere. The bookstall owner knew them slightly; but today he did not even smile at them. On the other hand, when Shastri asked, making a secret gesture, "Any good books?" the stallkeeper shut him up by putting a finger on his lips and looking meaningfully at the other customers.

When the others had left, the stallkeeper whispered to Shastri, "Don't ask me for books now. Don't you see, these are deadly times?" "Why?" Shastri asked. The stallkeeper looked this way and that, although there was no one around. Just then a police van drove past. The stallkeeper pointed to it and said in a low voice, "Emergency!" He did not look at them again; instead, he turned around to dust the bookshelves which had already been dusted.

Shastri and Prasad walked away, defeated in their venture. Shastri said, "Idiot! What does the Emergency have to do with the sale of books?" A second police van passed and Prasad said, "Well, it's illegal after all. You know, there used to be a tiny stall next to our house where you could get all kinds of foreign goods. Last night, the owner sold off everything at throwaway prices and closed down."

Shastri was silent. A tinge of fear crept into his mind, because the books were stored in his cupboard. Trying to suppress the fear he said, as though raising an issue of utmost gravity, "You know, it's wrong to ban a book on the grounds of obscenity. That's interfering with the individual's freedom! One has a fundamental right to read what one likes!"

"Well, if that was the situation here, we would never have started our club," Prasad said.

"That's true," Shastri said, displaying his erudition, "Pornography sold like hot cakes for a couple of years in Denmark, and then the market slackened. Now Denmark is only an exporter."

When they returned to the office that evening, Vishwanath was waiting for them in Shastri's office. He was disappointed to find them returning empty-handed; when he heard what had happened he said, "We'll have to shut down the club now."

Shastri said, " No, we'll have to look for spicy stuff which the law doesn't label as pornography. There are plenty of such books in the market." The evening was spent in desultory discussion, with no decisions taken.

That night Shastri remained upset as various rumours had been flying about all day, within the office as well as outside it, about the activities of the police. Arresting people without cause had become normal during those days. There was panic in the corridors of the office. Those of his acquaintances, who had been addicted to loud discussions on political affairs, were suddenly mute. Shastri himself had no interest in politics and kept away from any kind of agitation. He was unconcerned with the ethics of the emergency; but try as much as he did he could not forget those illicit books in his office cupboard and sleep eluded him at night. He would have to find a solution to the problem, first thing next morning.

On reaching the office he first rang up Vishwanath. "Those books in my cupboard," he had just begun, when Vishwanath hung up saying, "Wrong number!" When he rang up again, Vishwanath said, "I'm busy now; can you call after five minutes?" Shastri found this behaviour abnormal, because Vishwanath had always received his calls enthusiastically, hoping for news of some new arrival.

He walked away from the telephone, bolted the door and opened his cupboard. The library occupied a corner of the top shelf. He picked up some of the books. At any other time

he would have sat down to read, or at least would have scanned the pictures; but today he was quivering with nervousness. He placed the books on a lower shelf and hid them behind some files and papers. His mind buzzed with plans. Each day when he returned from the office, he would dump some of the books into the drain that flowed by. Or else he would carry the books home, shred them page by page and burn them. As he thought of the second alternative he remembered that the villain in some film he had seen had been betrayed by the smoke that arose, while he was burning secret documents. He stopped thinking on the subject and locked the cupboard after covering up the books with more papers.

He waited for the phone to ring but it was Prasad and not Vishwanath. Prasad said, "You are so well-read, Shastri, do you know anything about our obscenity laws?" Shastri told himself it was really important to read up the laws, but not wishing to expose his ignorance he said, "Yes, I'll tell you about them this afternoon." "Are we meeting this afternoon?" Prasad asked. "Someone was saying there won't be a lunch break now and the gates will be locked." "What nonsense!" Shastri replied, "Is this Hitler's Germany?"

Despite his own remark Shastri felt uneasy. He rang up Vishwanath again. Before he could speak Vishwanath said, "It's not safe to talk over the phone. I'll tell you everything at lunch time."

The warning from Vishwanath made Shastri even more apprehensive. How serious an offence was it to have proscribed books in one's possession, whether political or pornographic? He must find out.

When the three met that afternoon, Shastri asked, "Since when has it become an offence to use the phone?" "The trouble with you is," Vishwanath replied, "that you never care to find out what's happening around you. No phone is safe now. They're all being tapped."

"Oh come on," Shastri said, "there are thousands of telephones in the city. Do you mean to tell me they are all being tapped?" Prasad picked up the phone on Shastri's desk, examined it carefully and shook it vigorously. A small metal disc dropped out of the instrument. Prasad picked it up and showed it to the others, saying, "this must be a bug!"

Suddenly they were all silent. Vishwanath took off his watch and started to wind it up while Prasad got up to make coffee. When they had all settled down with their cups of coffee it was Prasad who broke the silence, again. "Have you received any more new reports?" he asked Shastri. No one laughed, although they all understood what he meant: it was as if their laughter would pass through that little metal disc into a control room somewhere and endanger all of them. Shastri got up, picked up the disc, walked across to the window and flung it as far away as he could. "No," he said, "the old ones are all I have."

He was reminded of the library. "I'm going to return all the reports," he added. There was something strange about the way in which he spoke and the others looked at him. They said nothing but a wordless understanding seemed to have been reached. The other two got up and walked out abruptly, leaving Shastri slightly puzzled.

How was he to get rid of those books? As a matter of fact, Vishwanath and Prasad had asked him long ago, to give away the books to them; it was he who had insisted on keeping them. That evening he carried one of the books out of the office in a manila envelope, intending to dump it somewhere. But there were crowds of people everywhere, and as for the open drain which would have been most convenient, it had been taken over, to his misfortune, by a herd of buffaloes. He went home and surveyed his kitchen. Through the window he could look into the kitchen of the adjoining flat, where people were moving about. He gave up the idea of burning

the book and carried it back with him next morning, still enclosed in the envelope, to the office.

That afternoon his friends did not come in at lunchtime. When he had given up hope they suddenly appeared. He was delighted to see them. "Why are you so late today?" he asked. "Emergency!" Prasad replied, "No one is allowed to leave the office even a minute early. More work; less talk." Vishwanath pulled a small transistor radio out of his pocket and put it on the table. "Why?" Shastri asked, "There's no cricket match on." Turning the volume up, Vishwanath explained, "The bug in the telephone!"

There was no reason for anyone to bug their phone, yet they felt relieved with the radio on and talked in a more relaxed manner. Shastri said, sipping coffee, "I can't keep these reports any longer. You can take them away." Prasad and Vishwanath ignored him.

"You can sell them to the bookstall owner," Vishwanath said, "We can buy them back once the Emergency is over. It'll mean a loss, but we can afford it." "Yes, that's a good idea," Prasad said. Shastri felt certain they had entered into a conspiracy to put him in danger. He reminded Prasad of the stallkeeper's behaviour a few days earlier. But when Prasad did not reply Shastri changed the topic. Nevertheless, all they could talk about was the Emergency, and Shastri felt more and more uneasy.

When they left, Shastri resolved that he would get rid of the books immediately, come what may. Prasad had said there were herds of government spies roaming all over the city. Shastri was sure the man he had seen standing on the road in front of the office, staring at his window, was a spy. It was being said that many respectable people had taken to spying as the pay was good and the government provided many facilities. And then a very unpleasant thought occurred to him. What if Prasad and Vishwanath sneaked on him? Of

course, he would make sure they didn't escape the net either. But the evidence would be found on him. Who would believe him? Then he reminded himself that Vishwanath and Prasad had been his intimate friends for years. Such thoughts were unworthy of him.

That evening, on the way home, he felt he was being shadowed. The rumours flying about everywhere terrified him. New fears arose each day. Shastri made it a point to open the cupboard each day and inspect the lowest shelf; the stack of concealed papers grew. But the fears never left him; the nights were sleepless.

With the club defunct, the midday visits of Prasad and Vishwanath declined. Now they seldom met and the conversation was brief and guarded. Shastri immersed himself in his work and tried to forget the explosive material lying on the lowest shelf of his cupboard. He read up the obscenity laws, but this only aggravated his fears.

Looking out of the window one afternoon he found a man standing with his hands in his pockets and a cigarette between his lips, facing his window. He did not remember what the person he had seen earlier on had looked like; but it was highly probable that this was the same character. He moved away from the window, stood where he could not be seen and continued to observe the man outside. This man went on looking at his window, never blinking. Shastri returned to his desk and drank up all the water in the tumbler. Just then the telephone rang. Startled, he picked it up but immediately, the caller disconnected.

These incidents unnerved him completely. He dialled Vishwanath's number. When Vishwanath picked up the phone Shastri hung up on an impulse. That evening, on his way home, he seemed to find police spies everywhere. He spoke to no one at home. After dinner, he came to a decision. He would go on a month's leave to his own village, leaving the

spies, the telephone tapping and the rumours far behind. He would carry those wretched books with him and there, amid the peace and quiet, he would float them away down the river.

That night, after days of sleeplessness, Shastri slept well, though the plan he had thought of, was not without its problems.

The Pukka Sahib

Tripathi Sahib had great plans but they did not materialise. The years passed, and the "bullock-cart" of government service having lurched to a preordained destination, he retired. Now, when he found time to think of the larger meaning of life, he had to admit that he did not have either the strength or the ability to execute the grandiose plans of his youth; nor did he have the desire to do so. There were times though, when he felt that a great deal *had* been achieved; what more could he have done? He had risen from an impoverished home in some obscure village to the top of the bureaucratic pyramid. His sons and daughters had distinguished themselves scholastically, found suitable jobs, got married and settled comfortably overseas. He had an enormous house to live in and a steady income from the investments he had made. How many people were so fortunate?

But no matter how determined he was to shake off the past, tiny memories invaded him during unguarded moments: of his destitute father, who had been a priest; the humiliating environment of the village school; the long years in high school and college, where books had been the sum total of existence. The flow of life took a sudden turn when he entered service in a native princedom in Orissa. The ruler of the state,

though barely educated, was a lover of English who owned an impressive library of English books. He took great delight in entertaining British guests from time to time. On such occasions Ramapada Tripathy's command of the English language was a great asset and he became the ruler's advisor on all things English and his link with the British community. When he had first entered college his town-bred classmates had made fun of his English. This proved to be a blessing as Ramapada became obsessed with the desire to master the language. On joining service, he bought a radio and listened religiously to the BBC programmes in order to refine his English accent and gain the acceptance of his British superiors. In both these endeavours he was quite successful.

With the improvement in speech, came enhancement in status and salary; he moved from one feudatory state to another, rising ever higher in rank. Ramapada Babu evolved rapidly into Tripathy Sahib. The magic of the English language and contact with British officialdom turned him into an authentic sahib. Fortunately, his wife collaborated with him fully and in her new incarnation distanced herself from village, family and childhood friends. Her dress, manners and gestures were transformed and she even spoke Oriya with a British accent.

Tripathy Sahib had been loaded with honours during his career. He was reputed to be an able administrator. As a coloured Englishman he avoided contact with natives, specially those who worked under him. His social contacts were limited to his equals, white or coloured; his moments of leisure were spent in the club, playing tennis, or going out on the occasional shikar.

With independence round the corner, Tripathy Sahib was worried that the new leaders would dump officials like him, who had thrived on British patronage. But this group of officials adapted easily to the change and won the new rulers over; there was no decline in their influence. So much so that

Tripathy Sahib's fear that his hard-earned mastery of the English language might become a liability proved to be unfounded; even after decades of independence there were no signs that the importance of the English language was threatened.

When Tripathy Sahib moved on retirement, from a government accommodation to his own house, the experience was both pleasant and painful. All his life had been spent in transit from one official bungalow to another. These bungalows had a certain character to which he had grown accustomed. On being transferred from one post to another, from one bungalow to another, he had never felt a stranger in a new home, because all his belongings used to be arranged in their proper places and his retinue of servants would take charge. Everything was always as it should be: his favourite foods were served on the familiar dining table and when he rose from his familiar bed, there was the comforting heap of files in the small anteroom. But the suburban home he had built for himself was different. Its architecture was not in his favourite British colonial style; it had been designed by a modern architect. Tripathy Sahib felt disoriented when he first moved in. He particularly felt the absence of his late wife; it was she who had supervised the construction, though she was never able to live in the house.

For the first time Tripathy Sahib became aware of all the debris that he had accumulated over the years: old office files that had never been opened; books loaned from libraries which he had never read and forgotten to return; addresses of welcome and farewell, elaborately framed; countless heaps of personal papers, shabby old clothing, battered trunks and suitcases. Tripathy Sahib decided to get rid of the unwanted junk before moving into his new home. Probing and poking into a bundle of old files he discovered a collection of yellowing papers that threatened to disintegrate on touch; all he could make out from the shreds was that they had been land records relating to his

early years in a native state. Perhaps sale deeds for some lands that he might have bought or sold. But at this particular moment he was unable to recall the properties or relationships that had entered or vacated his life at various stages. The papers did not remind him of any specific transaction; however, he vividly remembered the overbearing face of the young ruler of the state. He did not feel like throwing the file away: the memories clung to him.

Ultimately, nothing was discarded; everything reached his new home. The room which his wife had intended as her prayer room and which he had mentally designated as his library was choked with a mountain of old books and papers. Seated at his desk in an inconspicuous corner, Tripathy Sahib felt he was surrounded by a travelling display of his mobile bureaucratic life. Any file that he opened evoked vivid memories, even though the matters they pertained to, were not always clear. Tripathy Sahib spent a great deal of his time in the library, surveying his own past. He felt he could spend the rest of his days scanning those files, reliving his memories, even if he had no particular goal for the last part of his life, no occupation, no friends. He also had the urge to put all those old experiences into writing.

The main question before him now was: how was he to pass his time? Even after his retirement, he was given various minor assignments which kept him active. Though he did not have much to do, he went to the office religiously and observed regular hours. The work would be over in a couple of hours but he kept himself busy by creating unnecessary work for the staff in his small office, cooking up various problems for them to solve. Although he was successful in keeping himself fully engaged, he realised that he was not the same Tripathy Sahib to his former friends. He still had respect in official circles but he knew he was far removed from the seat of power. Even when playing cards at the club he was made to

feel small; he still occupied his old table, but all eyes were now focussed on the adjoining table which was occupied by his successor.

Playing cards was his only relaxation. He had to give up shikar on account of the new laws protecting wildlife. Likewise, he was forced to give up tennis. He continued playing when others of his age had already abdicated from the court. The new players were too young and agile for him and avoided playing with him if they could help it. When he did find an opponent he was invariably the loser, though he was sometimes allowed to win a game or two. How could he keep up his tennis under these circumstances?

Then his eyes began to fail him. One evening, when he was playing cards at the club, someone brought him a notice. Unable to read a word, he wiped his glasses clean, looked up at the light to confirm its brightness and finally defeated, handed the paper over for someone else to read. He went home and tested his eyesight trying to read prints of various sizes. He was unable to read anything except the headlines from the newspaper. He had never felt so helpless. Visiting the opthalmologist the next morning, he learnt that he had cataract in both eyes, but would have to wait until it matured before he could be operated upon.

The trouble with his eyes shattered his faith in his own fitness and ability. Although the treatment was simple, he would have to suffer for some months yet. The period of waiting was painful as he was forced to remain indoors. He could no longer dissect the morning newspapers; it was sheer torture to turn the pages over in his library, unable to decipher anything.

His only comfort at this time was his servant Basudev, who had been with him for ages. Tripathy Sahib had never tried to find out where he came from or whether he had a family of his own. He was a mere boy when he started working for Tripathy Sahib: first he learned to cook and then to read and

write and lastly, he acquired the skills of driving, tutored by the government drivers attached to the sahib. His greatest gift was his economy of speech; he was so familiar with Tripathy Sahib's habits that he never needed orders: he knew exactly what had to be done. He rarely took leave to visit his village, but when he did Tripathy Sahib felt lost. When he retired it was only Basudev who remained to serve him. Tripathy Sahib was worried that Basudev too would grow old and become an invalid. He was afraid to ask Basudev to drive at night. It would be good to have a younger servant. But only the assurance of a secure government job would induce others to serve him, and this Tripathy Sahib could no longer provide. And so he was totally dependent on Basudev.

Failing eyesight made any movement even within the house difficult for Tripathy Sahib. Friends advised him to let out the rooms on the first floor of the immense building. Actually he could have managed with just three or four rooms; the rest were filled with unwanted junk and keeping them clean consumed a great deal of time and labour. The thought of letting out the first floor *had* occurred to him, but he felt it would compromise his dignity. Could he allow another family to share the space that he occupied? But as time went by and the feeling of helplessness and insecurity grew the idea was becoming less repugnant. He even told himself that a tenant might be of help in an emergency. If the tenant happened to be a doctor, so much the better.

Once the decision was taken, his friends and acquaintances started to look for a suitable tenant. But the isolation of the house from any convenient shopping centre was a constraint. When he retired Tripathy Sahib had been keen to settle on the outskirts of the city, far away from the hubbub. His wife had approved of the site because of the temple nearby. However, the decision appeared now to be wrong. Not just tenants, even friends kept away on account of the distance.

A prolonged search yielded only one prospective tenant: someone wanted accommodation for an office. Rather unwillingly, Tripathy Sahib rented out the first floor, keeping the "library" under his own occupation. The furniture for the new office arrived, to Tripathy Sahib's great aversion. The people who came to the office on business intruded on his privacy. The only blessing was that there was no one to disturb Tripathy Sahib in the mornings and evenings, when the office was closed.

The siting of the office in his home, the deterioration in his vision and the consequent loss of mobility brought a total change in his lifestyle and attitude. For the first time he was made aware of his feebleness. His confidence in his own strength and ability vanished. Time hung heavy on him when he was no longer able to read the newspapers; and one day, because he had nothing better to do, he walked to the temple nearby. There was no one in the vicinity. He took off his shoes, walked in and sat down on a stone inside the temple precincts. The touch of the cool morning breeze seemed to bring back numerous memories, particularly those of the temple in his village. But on this day the memories gave him pleasure. The sense of wellbeing lingered all day and Tripathy Sahib resolved to spend an hour or two each morning, at the temple.

His contacts with his friends declined. When he stopped going to the club his friends occasionally called on him in the evenings, but now their visits were reduced. On some days Tripathy Sahib was all alone; the telephone was his only aide. He took to ringing up his friends and associates in the morning on returning from the temple; but as most people were then preparing to go off to work, no one had much time to spare for him. After a few minutes they would hang up, promising to call later. Only a few friends who had retired were prepared to talk at any length, but as they had nothing to talk about

except their ailments he felt all the more depressed. At first he was reluctant to mention his failing eyesight and thus expose his own weakness, but gradually he fell in tune with the others and began to provide detailed accounts of his affliction and the treatment he was undergoing.

Another habit that he acquired at this time was an appraisal of his friendships. He began to think of his condition as a time of suffering and to treat only those persons who came to see him as true friends. Under such scrutiny the number of his friends showed a sharp decline; when the cataract in his right eye was removed, he cancelled quite a few names from his list of friends. With his vision partially restored, however, life appeared considerably brighter. He gave up listening to news broadcasts on the radio and returned to the joy of reading newspapers. Erring friends were forgiven and the hand of friendship was extended, once again.

One morning, while he was drinking tea after his visit to the temple, a young visitor arrived and introduced himself as a research scholar interested in the administration of the former princely states. He said he would be grateful for an opportunity to go through the papers in Tripathy Sahib's possession. Tripathy Sahib was flattered that his collection of papers was perceived to be of such value, but he had no intention of sharing the treasure with anyone else. He explained politely to the young man that as he was planning to write a book himself he was unable to show him the documents. The visitor went back disappointed, but a few days later Tripathy Sahib received a letter from the state archives asking him to transfer the documents to them in the public interest and offering to pay a price for them. The letter annoyed him and Tripathy Sahib wrote back saying that he had no such documents in his possession. At the same time, he resolved to begin the task of writing his memoirs as soon as vision was restored in his other eye.

Some time later the cataract was removed. When the dressing was taken off and a new pair of glasses fitted, Tripathy Sahib felt he had returned to a familiar world. He had never experienced such agony as in these past eight or nine months. He went back to his club, his card games and his friends. He stopped visiting the temple: the newspapers took up all his morning hours. Though he periodically went back to his library he had no inclination to dig into those dusty old files.

Life trundled along lazily. His meals were served up properly on time, thanks to Basudev. The days were spent, apart from the evenings at the club, in siesta and gentle relaxation. He scrutinised the newspapers minutely in the morning, spoke for hours on the telephone to friends and acquaintances, sifted through the mail when it arrived and wrote the occasional letter to his stockbroker or his children. His friends often described the happiness they derived from playing with their grandchildren or writing to them when they were away, but Tripathy Sahib had no such happy tales to relate, as he had never been close to his children. It was only his wife who had kept up the contacts while she was alive; he had not been able to spare time for them out of his crowded office schedule. He was unable to forge new links with them after his wife passed away. Their relationship was confined to the New Year greeting card and the occasional inquiry, regarding essential matters.

He had no desire at this stage to start anything new. He did not even want to think about his past, let alone write about it. The sessions in the library were gradually reduced. He had hoped to pass the remainder of his life at this gentle pace, free from any hassles. But one night, when he was in the bathroom, he felt his head reel. When he regained consciousness he found himself on the floor, his head bleeding. He thought he would call Basudev for help, but told himself he was better. He must have blacked out. He washed his face, rested briefly

and was still debating whether to call Basudev when he felt dizzy again. Everything faded into darkness.

When he came back to his senses this time, he found himself lying in an unfamiliar room. A survey of the surroundings told him he was in a hospital. A sudden stab of fear shot through his chest. With eyes closed he tried to recall what had happened the night before. But the memory seemed to recede: had he been lying in hospital for days already? The door opened and a nurse walked in; when he attempted to question her she gestured that he was not to speak. He felt tired and drowsy and dropped off to sleep again.

When he was carried out of the Intensive Care Unit to another room he realised he had suffered a heart attack. Basudev stood at his bedside, and near him was Umapada. Tripathy Sahib had had no contact for years with this younger brother who lived in the village. He had continued their father's priestly profession and looked after the family lands. He felt disturbed. Was this rustic, whom he had deliberately shut out of his life, trying to assert a claim? But when Umapada put a gentle hand on his forehead and asked, "Elder Brother, how do you feel now?" he felt a stirring in some remote corner of his heart. He had intended to reply with a faint wordless smile, but tears came unasked into his eyes.

The ambulance transported him back to his home fifteen days later. The doctors had prescribed a severe regimen for him. Bland, fat-free food; a long walk every morning and evening. No alcohol. Tripathy Sahib told himself quietly that he would refuse to live such a life; but within days he had fallen into the new routine. His timetable changed completely. He had been away from the club so long that he no longer wanted to return to it. He began to enjoy his walks, which he had started reluctantly on the doctors' orders. Those solitary early morning strolls along deserted roads, with the cool breeze fanning him, gave him intense pleasure. The temple

was no longer just a milepost to measure the length of his ambulations; it became a destination.

His social life changed. As he no longer went out, his relationships were confined to those who called on him. Umapada visited him once in a while to inquire about his health, and this connection brought a number of old acquaintances from the village to his home. Umapada's son, who had a small medicine shop in the village, sometimes came to spend a day with him. Tripathy Sahib reminded himself that years ago Umapada had requested him to help his son find a job, but he had ignored the request. Sripada, his nephew, was a quiet, well-behaved young man; when he visited Tripathy Sahib he disturbed him as little as possible, spending most of his time in Basudev's company. Once, when Basudev fell ill, Tripathy Sahib did not know what to do; but fortunately, Sripada arrived and took charge of everything. Tripathy Sahib found himself wishing that he had such a strong, active young man living in the house with him.

One morning his eldest son, who had settled in the United States, arrived. He had been unable to come when Tripathy Sahib was unwell. He was accompanied by his wife and children, and they had taken rooms in a hotel to avoid inconveniencing anybody. The next morning Tripathy Sahib's American daughter-in-law took his two grandchildren sight-seeing to Konark and Puri, and the son came alone to see his father. He had little time in hand and as Tripathy Sahib wanted to discuss a number of urgent matters with his son, he had jotted down the points on a scrap of paper. His main problem was the management of his property and bank accounts. When he tried to speak to his son about his property and his shares, the latter appeared disinterested. Tripathy Sahib's assets, immense by his own standards, appeared negligible to his America-based son. Having listened to all that his father had to say, he said, "I don't want a share in all this; you can ask

the others and do as you wish." Irritated, Tripathy Sahib contemplated bequeathing everything to some orphanage. His son saw the disappointment on his father's face and said, "Father, I cannot possibly take on new responsibilities."

At this age? Tripathy Sahib looked at his son. He really looked old. How soon time had passed! Tripathy Sahib remembered his birth. He became even more aware of the passage of time when his daughter-in-law and the grandchildren came to say goodbye. His granddaughter was a young woman of about twenty-five; soon she would get married and have a family. He would graduate into great-grandfatherhood. He had looked forward to meeting his grandchildren and sharing a few happy moments, but the shadow of time had darkened everything.

He had another realisation on meeting his grandchildren. They were thoroughly American in their speech. When he spoke to them Tripathy Sahib felt that his carefully cultivated British accent was a fake. Then he realised that he had relapsed into his original native accent, which had not a trace of the BBC influence! When the children had left he picked up an English book and read out a page to himself, aloud. No matter how much he strained himself the British accent refused to come back. It deserted even his Oriya speech. When he spoke to Umapada, Sripada or Basudev, it was in the rustic colloquial Oriya he had used as a child. Others might not have noticed the change, but Tripathy Sahib appeared to have forgotten that he had once spoken Oriya as well as English with a BBC accent!

After his eldest son had spurned his inheritance, Tripathy Sahib too grew indifferent to all his possessions. He had planned to write to his other children and get their views, but now he felt it would be a waste of time: they were bound to echo what the eldest son had said. He consulted his friends and acquaintances about giving away his properties to some

trust. They generally recommended the trusts that they were themselves associated with; and scoffed when other organisations were mentioned, saying it would be like casting money into water. Tripathy Sahib was disgusted and postponed his decision.

The people in the office upstairs had made repeated requests for additional accommodation, which he had been ignoring; but this time, when the head of the establishment raised the matter again, Tripathy Sahib agreed to let out his precious library to them, as he was unable to climb the stairs to reach it. When the tenants asked him what was to be done with all the papers stored in the almirahs, Tripathy Sahib informed them that he had no further use for them: they were to be disposed of in any manner that the tenants thought fit. He handed over the keys to the room and the almirahs; and when the almirahs had been emptied and sent downstairs, he did not even ask what had been done with the papers.

Earlier, the days had appeared to pass slowly, but now the passage of time suddenly turned into a rush. He had no sooner taken his medicines for the morning and lay down in bed when it was time for the evening doses. The bills were hardly paid up each month, and the bills for the following month would arrive. The first floor was leased out to the office for a year at a time, but he had barely signed a new lease when the tenants arrived with renewal papers. Now he had no fixed time for sleeping or awakening. He had acquired the habit of sleeping, waking up and falling asleep again. He seemed to be living in an unreal world.

With the progressive decline in health came a corresponding reduction in the number of friends visiting him, from the city. On the other hand now it was not just Umapada who came to see him from the village: numerous other people visited him as well. Sripada frequently came to town on business and stayed with him. Then, when a tottering old man from the

village came to his door calling out, "Ramu! Ramu!", the affectionate name by which his friends had addressed him in his childhood, Tripathy Sahib was suddenly thrown back into a vanished past, where he had not dared to venture for years. The old man's cry carried him back to the little stream in the village, the mango orchards, the ancient temple dedicated to the goddess, the chill autumn winds ushering in the festival of the full moon, the blazing afternoon sun. The images of childhood returned most vividly, even though recent events had grown dim.

Meanwhile, his daily routine had changed completely. The pain in his back and neck had forced him to sleep on a hard bed, without a pillow or mattress. One night he fell off the bed in his sleep and was told that at his age it was best to sleep on the floor. He had grown accustomed to the use of an airconditioner, but found that it aggravated his backache. He had it removed and slept all summer on a straw mat spread on the hard floor. Medical constraints and Basudev's increasing feebleness had made his diet exceedingly simple. When the drugs prescribed by his doctors offered no relief he consulted an ayurved practitioner from his village and was advised to take pakhala — boiled rice which had been soaked overnight. His old physician agreed that pakhala was the ideal food at his age.

The management of the household had changed as well. His movements were restricted to a few rooms, downstairs. The people in the office had been clamouring for yet more space. Finally, Tripathy Sahib agreed to let out the greater portion of the house, keeping just a couple of rooms for his own use. Signboards outside and inside the building proclaimed its total annexation by the tenant office, relegating Tripathy Sahib and Basudev to an insignificant corner at the rear of the house. The office even bought his ancient motor car, which was falling apart from disuse, for a song.

Tripathy Sahib did not want his affluent, healthy and anglicised friends to witness his decay. Gradually, all contacts with his friends in town, ceased. He was happy when Umapada came occasionally to see him. He had long chats with Basudev on a variety of topics. The news on the radio bored him. He found it a strain to converse with outsiders and was aware that he often sounded incoherent. Psychological fear gripped him, along with physical infirmity. He felt most at ease during Sripada's brief visits.

The only consolation was the swift passage of time. Often, he was unable to tell whether he had just woken up or was about to fall asleep. Dreams and reality merged. He would sometimes dream of Sripada and find him standing by his bedside, holding a glass of water. In his dream, he walked past the temple in his village and woke up to the sound of the temple bells in his neighbourhood. Life became a mosaic of light and shadow in which past and present mingled to form an indeterminate landscape.

Tripathy Sahib was sleeping lightly that afternoon. For sometime past he had stopped using elaborate clothing: even a simple dhoti seemed cumbersome to him. He had only a rough hand-spun gamuchcha wrapped around himself. In a bronze bowl by his bedside was the pakhala left over from his lunch. He had not shaved in days, finding the task tedious. He looked very much like his late father, the village priest. The dreams that came to him now were of his childhood in the village. He dreamt he was running through muddy rice fields; he had slipped and fallen, and someone in the distance was calling him by his name: "Ramu! Ramu!" The call woke him up. He opened his eyes and looked around, but could see nothing clearly inside that closed room. But the ringing of temple bells in the village could be heard, very clearly.

In these short stories, J.P. Das is the quintessential raconteur with an instinctive mastery of the form that this genre imposes. The stories hold the reader in thrall from the opening sentence leading him through convoluted corridors, and depositing him on the threshold of some unforeseen mystery. The slow, deliberate accretion of detail leaves the reader impatient for the inevitable climax, which provides both a sense of relief as also of disbelief. Drawing successfully upon his own experiences in the bizarre and often grotesque world of bureaucracy as much as from the solid everyday world of middle class India, the dominant impression Das has tried to leave you with, is one of bemused irony. One meets here the pompous officer, the ingratiating peon, the obsequious section officer, the rustic youth who has moved to the city, the middle class professional who has migrated overseas and the strong emancipated woman who wears her feminism on her sleeve. A certain suavity, which is in sharp contrast to the provincial even parochial tone of much writing in regional languages, marks these stories. The art of understatement is part of the deliberate craftsmanship that has been assiduously adopted. *The Pukka Sahib* from which the collection gets its title represents the essential human condition."In my beginning is my end."In the Indian ethos, progress is circular rather than linear. Perhaps this is what the short stories, which seem to deny the possibility of progression, are all about.

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